

Proletarian Writers, the Working Environment and the Struggle for Hegemony

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The Swedish labour market is distinguished by the circumstance that both employers and employees are exceedingly well organised. The predominant organisations are the Swedish Employers' Confederation (SAF), the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO), and the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (SACO). The SAF and the LO, founded around the turn of the last century, have continuously dominated Swedish labour market relations. Distinctive as well has been the preponderant position of the Social Democratic Party. But a further feature, if one compares with other industrialised countries, has been the emergence of the many working-class writers who sharply criticised the working conditions of the proletariat.

In this article, I will discuss these writers' criticisms of working conditions with regard to occupational safety, the working environment and working life developments in general during the height of the industrial era in Sweden, i.e. from 1930 to 1975. This huge task has here been circumscribed in various ways. I intend to look at how the intellectuals of the time – but even some trade union representatives – responded to these critics, who in fictional form portrayed the shifting faces of power in working life. A vital discussion was provoked between the intellectuals and these proletarian authors, concerning fundamental values of the industrial society. Some of these writers, and especially one, Folke Fridell (1904-1985), focused on the very basis of working life organisation and its leading ideas of power. The choice of Fridell is thereby motivated. This allows us also to discuss the importance of these writers, above all through their concentration on the individual and the relationships between individual women and men, thereby breaking with the technocratic dualism of working life versus family life and leisure time.¹

In the first instance, I will present the textile worker Folke Fridell's writings, and the debate he stirred up through the issues he raised and championed, in relation to the prevailing views of the industrial society on management, workplace organisation and psychosocial issues. Factory work, according to Folke Fridell, was degrading, a labour without human dignity. The factory worker lacked the courage, however, to look his own situation in the eye. He is too proud to admit

¹ Sund (1999) and Josefson (1989).

his discomfort, said Folke Fridell,² who was also a sharp critic of the advanced specialisation of factory labour. He had long experience of traditional factory work and also criticised the anti-democratic tendencies in working life. He wanted more power for the workers.³ The actors in the industrial society – the major political and labour market organisations – had access to and could mobilise powerful resources in their efforts to push forward industry and the society according to their own logic. The power base of the industrial society was a historical, political and economic bloc consisting of two opposing forces, who nevertheless had shared interests regarding the major issues.

One of these forces consisted of leading circles in private enterprise, mainly grouped around the large banks and export firms. The other power centre was the labour movement with its various political branches – the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP), the Social Democratic Youth of Sweden (SSU) and the trade union confederation (LO). The farmers' movement also formed a part of the bloc from the beginning of the 1930s to the mid-1950s. This bloc had hegemony and therefore a decisive influence over the societal agenda.⁴ Other organised forces and persons who attempted to raise and promote dissident views, such as Folke Fridell, were met either with silence or with powerful opposition.

Along with the Italian power theoretician Antonio Gramsci (1897-1937), I would say that the intellectuals played a major role in the struggle for survival of this historical bloc.⁵ And it is mainly against these intellectuals that Fridell waged his ideological war. His concerns were with attitudes to work, as well as the military organisation of working life. But Folke Fridell was not alone in raising criticism of factory conditions and their consequences in terms of occupational injuries and poor psychosocial environment. Also other proletarian authors, such as Maria Sandel (1870-1927), Moa Martinsson (1904-1978), Elsa Appelquist (1909 -) and Stig Sjödin (1917-1993), addressed working environment issues in their poetry and prose.⁶ I have chosen this particular group of authors because together they stand for an important and forward-looking criticism of the industrial society's working conditions.

However, before placing Fridell in his political, economic and literary context and confronting him with his critics, let me first present some background information on the transformation of the Swedish industrial society up to the 1980s, when the contours of the information and service society began to become increasingly visible. The development of occupational safety and the working envi-

² Lagercrantz (1978) p 61.

³ See Sund (1999) and Blom (1978).

⁴ SOU 1990:44 chapter 9.

⁵ Among the great mass of literature on Antonio Gramsci, see e g Adamson (1980), Hobsbawm (1974), Jackson Lears (1985).

⁶ For overviews and articles on these authors, see footnotes 1 and 2, and Runnquist (1952), Lönnroth and Delblanc (1993), Olls et al (1989).

ronment will also be described, along with the leading actors and institutions involved. After this follows a theoretical section in which the Gramsci model of power and hegemony is presented, and the creation and maintenance of hegemony through the building of historical blocs or alliances between different forces in society is discussed. In this context, the role of the intellectuals is also addressed. In the final section of the article the results arrived at are evaluated in a power structure perspective.

Background

The Transformation of the Industrial Society

At the turn of the last century, Sweden was still a relatively poor country with limited possibilities for the greater part of the Swedish population living in the rural countryside. The periodically falling prices of export products weakened earnings and stiffened job competition. In this situation, many chose to leave Sweden and emigrate to North America in search of a new life. Especially during the crisis-ridden years of the 1880s, a heavy stream of Swedish emigrants crossed over the Atlantic to the United States.

The upheaval taking place around 1900 was radical in other ways as well. From the 1890s, the electronics industry, the machine industry and the new consumption industry, e.g. textiles and ready-to-wear clothing, all grew at a steady pace – a development directly related to institutional changes in the society. This is also when the industrial society's major interest groups were formed, i.e. the trade unions and employers' organisations that became pivotal in the development of the Swedish welfare state that grew up within the framework of the industrial society. During this period, the party structure also found its modern form. The labour movement grew and stabilised, and the right to vote became a major battle cry until at the beginning of the 1920s, when a solution was found in that all women and men were given equal rights to vote.

Electrification, industrial development and the continued extension of the infrastructure in the form of telecommunications and urban expansion increased the demand for capital credit, leading to an expansion of the banking sector. This, in turn, led to a renewed increase in the import of capital to Sweden, and there was some economic speculation involved in the expansion of electrical power resources. New forms of credit developed and the stock market took off with the breakthrough of the Stockholm Stock Exchange at the turn of the century. Had this industrial logic been allowed to continue, a phase of integration and great investment would have followed. What happened instead was the outbreak of the First World War.

After the war and the shortening of the working day (the Act regulating the eight-hour day was passed in 1919), there was a crisis in industry. Particularly

vulnerable branches were steelworks and sawmills, but even the engineering industry was made to feel the pinch. The pressure to rationalise was considerable. In spite of all this, however, the Swedish situation was generally good. Firms were soon able to resume their export production. The heavy rationalisations led to increased productivity and higher incomes, and a good supply of capital meant that new products could meet with a ready market.⁷ But changes in demand and the rationalisations following on the shortened working day led to a wave of unemployment that remained relatively high during the 1920s. And it was partly during this time that Folke Fridell worked in a textile factory in Lagan in southern Sweden.

In Sweden, where dominant influences had earlier come from Germany, the many new impulses now came from the USA. The American mass production industry began spreading its goods and ideas to Sweden. From there were taken new management principles; various rationalisation techniques, such as the conveyor belt and the electrical motor-driven machine; as well as new ideas for the organisation and application of occupational safety rules through “the safety movement” and “safety first” campaigns.⁸ The Swedish firms were quick to catch on and soon began to follow American patterns. Office machinery, indispensable to the growing service sector, became increasingly widespread. The problem was that the trade unions were considerably stronger in Sweden than in the USA and could neither be ignored nor subdued. This meant that Swedish management was forced to seek co-operation with the labour movement, with or without the involvement of the third party, the State.⁹

During the transition to the developed industrial society, the popular movements, above all the trade union organisations, gained an extremely important role. Through their policies and actions, the extensive and growing labour movement, beginning in the early 1930s, became the bearers of the new, emerging industrial society as well as of the Swedish welfare state. The Swedish labour movement became the foundation of the state and joined political forces with the farmers’ movement.

Electrification and the advancement of the motorcar became increasingly important factors during the 1930s. The result was an extension of the infrastructure with the help of the electrical and the petrol-powered motor, creating further new opportunities for enterprises and organisations. This transformation was part of a greater process taking place in the country right up to the 1960s with the active participation of the state, its task being to contribute to planning and financing. Gradually, these changes came to affect all sectors of the society, and one decisive shift that emerged was that women began to find their way into the labour

⁷ For this section unless otherwise indicated see Schön (2000) chapter 4-5.

⁸ Sund (1993).

⁹ Elvander (2000).

market – the female employment rate increasing appreciably in the post-war years of the 1950s. The further development of health care, care of the old and disabled, and of the educational system created the basis for an expansion of the public sector, where public authorities and the state came to have an even more marked influence on society.

The period leading up to the 1960s was something of a golden age in Sweden, with steady growth and a rapidly expanding economy. The driving force behind this development was heavy industry (iron ore and steel, etc), but also firms in the engineering industry (SKF, Atlas Copco, ASEA, LM Ericsson, etc) that sold their products on the world market. In the shoe, textile and clothing industries, however, there was stagnation, in spite of modern production methods. Textiles and clothing were much cheaper to produce in other countries with weaker trade unions and lower wages, and many firms were driven out of business.¹⁰

Towards the end of the 1960s, the pinch of international competition increasingly began to be felt in the previously so successful export industries. The need again arose for rationalisations to reduce production costs. Automation and large-scale production with a high degree of specialisation became necessary measures if firms were to retain their market shares. Within industrial enterprises, a rapid development took place in electronics applications, above all with regard to powering systems and equipment for the processing industries. At the beginning of the 1970s, it was thought that this expansion would only continue, and huge investments were made in shipyards and in heavy industry. The oil producing countries, also counting on an increased consumption of oil, raised their prices. But these world market actors had judged the situation wrongly. A severe crisis arose. The “oil price shock” led to a widespread structural crisis. However, at this point, new ideas and innovations began to well up through the cracks, and new branches and regions took the fore in international competition and growth. The Japanese model of cooperation within the enterprise and quality integration within the work organisation began to receive attention.¹¹

The 1970s crisis showed clear parallels with the structural crises of 1890 and 1930, in that mainly branches of heavy industry and shipyards were subjected to severe competition and new demands. But there were also important differences. This time, Sweden found itself on the debit side, experiencing great difficulties in reshaping the economy to the new conditions. The now ailing mines, the steel works, the pulp and paper mills, the shipyards had all been in a mode of post-war expansion. When at last the work of reconstruction got under way, however, adaptation to the new demands of the economy was relatively quick.

The problem-solving logic of the Swedish model contributed to this, still functioning in spite of the industrial society’s two main forces beginning to go their

¹⁰ Thörnquist (1991).

¹¹ Sandkull & Johansson (2000) chapter 10-12.

separate ways at the beginning of the 1970s. This was when leading persons in the private sector began to feel that the labour movement was out of contact with reality. They put forward hostile propositions in the parliament and drove through negative laws.¹² The symbolic divisive issue separating the two main forces became the Wage-earners Investment Funds.¹³ Fundamentally, however, the disagreement concerned what road to take in the development away from the industrial society, and this lack of agreement soon made itself felt on every level. During the 1980s, the manufacturing industry gradually abandoned the system of central wage negotiations, and the Taylorist approach to work organisation was discarded. Both centralism and Taylorism had been basic elements of the Swedish model, which now began to dissolve.¹⁴

On a structural level, the industrial society was now fundamentally transformed. The Act on Co-Determination at Work had been introduced and the Taylorist management and job splitting methods were replaced with “flatter” organisations that demanded competence of all personnel – precisely the types of changes and reforms that Folke Fridell had discussed already in the 1940s. But certain jobs became more impoverished, especially in administration and similar areas of work. In social service and health care occupations, organisational changes often led to further deterioration in the working environment.

The Development of Occupational Safety

In examining the statistics on Swedish occupational injuries (accidental or task-related) and attempting to use them for descriptive purposes, one must remember what these statistics essentially represent. They are certainly no true reflection of reality in the sense of tallying the actual number of persons who had suffered injuries or become ill through their work. Instead, what the statistics tell us are the numbers who have *reported* injury or illness, or who at a later stage had their conditions accepted as occupational injuries (the latter are a special branch of statistics). One complication – if small – is that a person might also have a condition approved as an occupational injury that had perhaps been incurred in quite another context than working life. The major complication, however, was that many injuries were not accepted as occupational injuries and that many therefore, quite likely the major part, were never reported.¹⁵

Around 1930, on the verge of the mature and developed industrial society, about 100,000 accidents were reported each year. Twenty years later the corresponding figure was about 300,000. This figure included task-related illnesses, but as few illnesses at that time were classified as occupational, reporting was

¹² Lundqvist (2000) p 97.

¹³ Stråth (1998).

¹⁴ Sund (publication pending) SEKO, politiken och marknaden.

¹⁵ Åmark (2000).

little and that proportion of the total was low. This great increase in the number of accidents can have several explanations. One that is certain is the increase in employment as a result of the intensified industrialisation. But other conceivable explanations – since even the relative rate of accidents (number of incidents per employee) increased – were:

- that the occurrence of reporting increased, above all because even minor injuries were included in the statistics from the 1930s on,
- that better protective measures were introduced and established through an agreement between the SAF and the LO in 1942 concerning the setting up of safety organisations in every workplace, leading to more safety engineers and safety ombudsmen to monitor the workplace and make sure that accidents were reported,
- that the working environment *de facto* became more dangerous because of rationalisations and stress in the production process due to piecework. In 1940, the head of *Scania Vabis* in Södertälje noted that rationalisations had caused a deterioration in the working environment.¹⁶ The statistically reliable working-environment indicator, the mortality rate, was relatively constant at about 500 per year in the period 1920-1955, barring a redoubling during the war due to torpedoed trading vessels and inexperienced labour.¹⁷

This linear increase in the number of accidents, which according to the statistics had begun already before the 1930s, was of course problematic for the actors of the hegemonic bloc and counteracted their efforts to achieve the legitimising assent of the workers to prevailing production and insurance conditions. The government therefore appointed several commissions of investigation in the 1930s, whose task was to propose solutions to the problems of poor working environment, increasing work accidents, and work-related illnesses. The work of these commissions was impeded by the war but finally resulted in two important new laws. These were the Worker Protection Act in 1949, including the establishment of a new public authority, the National Board of Occupational Safety and Health, to both supervise and be responsible for defining limits and making new regulations, and the Act on Occupational Injury Insurance in 1955. Also in 1955, health insurance was guaranteed for all through the new National Insurance scheme. This gave employees the right to take a week of sick leave for lesser complaints without needing to produce a doctor's certificate.¹⁸

This new and radical intervention by government and parliament meant that from 1955, all minor injuries not leading to sick leave of more than a week were

¹⁶ Lundqvist (2000) p 32.

¹⁷ Isacson & Söderlund (1975) p 71.

¹⁸ Åmark (2000).

removed from the accident statistics, leaving only the more serious injuries. This provided better control and the number of occupational injuries (accidents and work-related illnesses) stabilised on a much lower level. But, as it turned out, the problem of poor working environment remained. The more trivial injuries concealed a working-life reality that spoke of harsh conditions, stress and a number of other risk factors.¹⁹

This came to light through an extensive working environment survey carried out by the powerful LO head office at the end of the 1960s, in response to the sharp criticisms raised in various quarters – including the proletarian writers – against existing work organisation and poor working environments. The survey revealed that workers generally experienced their working environments to be deficient. Eighty per cent of respondents saw their environments as risky. The signals from this survey and other reports, as well as the great miners' strike in the ore fields of northern Sweden in 1969-70 led to state investigations and intense reform activity.

New laws were passed to try to stabilise the workplace situation and to create security for the workers – the Act on Co-determination at Work in 1976, the Act on Occupational Injury Insurance in 1977 and the Work Environment Act in 1978. Further, the major actors on the labour market negotiated a working environment agreement in 1976 (the first since 1942). The aim of the Working Environment Act was to prevent ill health and accidents at work and create a good working environment. A vital idea behind the law was to increase worker power through participation in management. This aim, to increase job satisfaction through participation, was also behind the Act on Co-Determination.²⁰

What was new in the 1970s, as the industrial society began to fade, was not that the number of work accidents increased but that the number of reported illnesses showed a rapid growth from year to year. These were alarming signals. Most often, the complaint was musculo-skeletal disorder – injuries caused by monotonous and repetitive work, mainly in the arms, lower back, shoulders and neck, with women being afflicted more often than men. In the 1970s and 1980s psychosocial aspects also began to come strongly to the fore and to be awarded attention, where before they had mostly been ignored.

Computerisation was one of the factors triggering the increase in reported injuries – many tasks were readapted to the new computer systems and people reacted with psychological and somatic complaints. Earlier, the limited-motion routine jobs had mostly been found in industry and especially in the textile industry. Now they were everywhere, though partly in another form. A time had come with a new awareness of unpleasant conditions at work, now expressed as open discon-

¹⁹ Sund (2000).

²⁰ Edling (2000).

tent – a wearing of the body and chafing of the soul that had long ago been pointed out and brought alive by the proletarian writers.²¹

Theory

Gramsci, Hegemony and the Intellectuals

Antonio Gramsci's theories of political sociology can usefully be applied to an analysis of power relations in the Swedish industrial society. According to Gramsci, the maintenance and development of employee consent is a major strategic task for the leaders of any hegemonic bloc. Central to Gramsci's theories of power and politics is the concept of hegemony based on force (violence or the threat of violence), on the one hand, and consensus, on the other. Hegemony is a specific power relationship between the dominating and the dominated. Gramsci calls this stable organisational relationship a hegemonic bloc, containing active cultural, political and economic forces.²²

Consensus is achieved on account of the contradictory consciousness of the leading groups and classes (common sense, manners, customs). The human mind holds the capacity for both opposition and for resignation and apathy, resulting in a form of passivity leading to a preservation of the status quo. But the concept also stands for a specific politico-historical level of development for a group or class in a society, in an awareness of sharing a common culture or fundamental pattern of ideas and a mutual standing in moral values. The concept of hegemony focuses on the entire range of cultural and ideological manifestations as a way of understanding the political and economic development of a society. Gramsci thus refutes Friedrich Engels' thesis that in the final analysis the economy is always the most crucial factor in a society's development.

The leading groups have hegemonic resources at their disposal. Such resources may include political parties, trade union organisations, cultural institutions and the educational system. These resources function as tools to legitimate the prevailing order and avoid open confrontation by holding open channels for debate and protest. Hegemony is never static, but always a compromise between the leaders and the led – a condition of balance, according to Gramsci, in a constant state of readjustment. Hegemony should therefore be seen as a process with room for debate and contradictory cultural expressions.

Consensus is organised with the help of the intellectuals. The concept of the intellectual is also central to Gramsci's thinking, their social function being as conveyors of ideas within the civil society and between the government and civil society. Every major interest group spawns its own intellectuals who give the

²¹ Sund (1992) p 62 ff.

²² This section is based on Adamson (1980), Hobsbawm (1974), Jackson Lears (1985) and Sund (1989).

group a sense of homogeneity and consciousness of its task, not only within the economic system but also in the wider social and political arenas. Intellectuals are obligatory in every group striving for power and hegemony. To this group belong, according to Gramsci, writers, artists, journalists, administrators in industry, economists, physicians and lawyers. In modern society, new groups, such as TV reporters and personalities on the cultural scene, also arise.

It is important to point out that any individual can become an intellectual. In Gramsci's view, every person carries with him-/herself the potential ability to form his/her own environment. The ordinary person in the crowd becomes an intellectual at the very moment that s/he resists being led by "common sense" (the contradictory human consciousness) and becomes a conscious "philosopher", questioning the prevailing order. Further, intellectuals are of two kinds, traditional and organic: that is to say, those who work to preserve the status quo, and those who work to promote anti-hegemony. In Gramsci's terms, it happens that traditional intellectuals defect to the organic intellectuals trying to create a new historical bloc.

In order to build a bloc, the intellectuals must formulate a philosophy connecting to broad groups of people and make it plausible that their interests coincide with those of the society at large. A historical bloc, according to Gramsci, can be defined as an alliance between groups with mutual economic, political and cultural interests. Hegemony always requires a historical bloc, but a historical bloc need not be hegemonic. One can thus imagine several competing historical blocs, either already existing or in some state of construction.

During the era of the mature industrial society (1930-1975), only one historical bloc emerged in Sweden. No other bloc under construction has so far been evident in the literature. As we have seen, this bloc was composed of two powerful forces, the leading circles in the private sector and the labour movement, in which the farmers' movement was included for a time. Within this bloc, implicit or explicit, there were common problems, and solutions were formulated with regard to economic doctrines, organisational issues, specific vertical or horizontal work organisational structures and in managerial views of gender, science and technology. There was also a common and institutionalised method of solving conflicts, of which the investigative organs of the state formed an important part.

The historical bloc changed and became consolidated during the years, most so in the record-breaking years of the 1960s. During the 1970s, however, the bloc began to dissolve and disintegrate. The different forces in the traditional alliance began at that time to pull in different directions. This development was prompted by the labour movement, whose intellectuals could no longer accept the bloc's agenda in terms of its view of co-determination and working environment. It was becoming difficult, not to say impossible, to retain the workers' acquiescence. But up to the 1970s, the intellectuals of the historical bloc had firmly defended its view of work organisation and the working environment. Let us here abandon the

decay of the historical bloc and instead focus our attention on the early criticisms that arose in the 1940s and 1950s, such as Folke Fridell's penetrating analyses. What issues were raised and what response did they provoke? What attitude did the bloc's intellectuals take to e.g. Fridell's views and proposals?

The Proletarian Writers' Protest

Maria Sandel, Moa Martinsson, Elsa Appelquist, Stig Sjödin

The majority of – and the most influential – proletarian writers belong to the 1920s and 1930s, writes Helmer Lång.²³ After the 1930s the working-class writers became fewer and after the 1970s, the term can hardly be applied at all, at least not in Sweden, considering the development of the school system and of the welfare state. Yet, the theme remains as urgent as ever, though with a partly new working life to formulate and represent.

The concentrated emergence of self-taught poets from the depths of the Swedish people was unique. There is hardly an equivalent to be found anywhere else, with the exception perhaps of the other Nordic countries. These mainly self-taught authors either were or had been workers. They had never sat rapt in university lecture rooms or participated in post-seminar colloquiums. But the Swedish working-class writers had their models. The admired precursor was August Strindberg (1849-1912), in spite of the fact that he was not of the proletariat and had only in passing showed interest in or described the everyday life of the labouring man. In fact, his contribution amounted to a few interested and class-conscious, but limited, references in his novel, *The Red Room*, and a few scenes in *A Dream Play*. But in his autobiography, *Tjänstekvinnans son* (The Maidservant's Son), Strindberg struck a note that incited and fired up enthusiasm. His direct followers did likewise. Eyvind Johnson (1900-1976), Ivar Lo-Johansson (1901-1990), Vilhelm Moberg (1898-1973), Harry Martinsson (1904-1976) and Moa Martinsson (more about her authorship below) all wrote in the form of fiction about their own childhoods – the experiences that they were most familiar with.²⁴

The first really import proletarian author in Nordic literature was the Dane, Martin Andersen Nexö (1869-1954). In his autobiographical suite, *Pelle the Conqueror*, he portrayed, among other things, agricultural workers on the island of Bornholm. The first important Swedish writers in this genre began to appear in the 1910s. One of these was Maria Sandel, whose novels *Familjen Vinge* (The Vinge Family) and *Virveln* (The Vortex) deal with her own experiences of factory life in Stockholm. She had been a textile worker specialised in knitwear and roundly criticised the great risks of accident and the ailments incurred in the workshops. The factory environment she paints in dark colours, but the workers,

²³ See foreword to Olls et al (1989) p 10.

²⁴ Ibid p 10 ff.

who are skilled and proud of their proficiency, are treated with great empathy, especially the female workers. These were workers of the “right stuff”, who did not succumb to facile temptations. Workers, in Sandel’s description, were forced to work under irrational control systems and were further oppressed by capricious male supervisors.²⁵

In *Virveln* she gives a detailed description of the working conditions in a chocolate factory, where the work organisation leads to workers trying to avoid certain tasks. Avoidance or “go slow” becomes a game. Each evening the workers go through a body search to make sure no chocolates are stolen. The heroine, the young woman Magda Mejsel, has a hard job beating the liquid chocolate. To begin with, her wrists ache terribly, but later she learns the technique and things get better.²⁶

Maria Sandel was the first female working-class author in Sweden. Her books give a description of factory life, but they also throw light on a phenomenon that deeply marked working life at that time, namely, the very definite segregation of the sexes. “It is not a matter of chance”, writes Eva-Karin Josefson, “that she places her working women in a chocolate factory. A chocolate factory at the turn of the century was a clearly female-dominated place.”²⁷ Women were very poorly paid, their wages being about half the average male wage and their jobs were largely routine. Several of the women in *Virveln* had such typical jobs, packaging the finished bars of chocolate, whereas the men employed at the factory were all in managerial or supervisory positions.

In the footsteps of Sandel came Moa Martinsson, who of course also wrote from a female perspective. In the opinion of Helmer Lång, she is unequaled among the proletarian authors of the 1930s. The action in her novel *Sally’s Sons* takes place in a textile factory. Moa Martinsson had not worked in such a factory but her mother had. Moa herself worked as a child-minder and as a waitress, before moving on to becoming a cold-buffet manager. The work in Sally’s factory is monotonous. The factory is noisy and smelly. Sally’s mother has the task of shredding rags, the same task as Fridell’s workers, but in spite of the conditions, she is not unhappy. In fact, she is pleased when she gets clean, fine textiles to shred. But in her thoughts, she keeps going back to the time when she was young and was able to weave beautiful pieces of cloth herself. She is also very conscious of the fact that she can be laid off at any time, if the quantity of work should fall off.

Sally’s sons also end up working in the factory. One of their workmates with whom they share a room dies of blood poisoning after having had a thumb torn off in a machine. There are no safety precautions. Earlier, this same man had lost

²⁵ Josefson (1989) p 43 ff.

²⁶ Sandel (1975 edition).

²⁷ Josefson (1989) pp 55-56.

a finger in another machine. That accident had been the result of an impatient and unsympathetic engineer forcing the pace. The surgeon at the hospital, who found himself having to amputate the next finger as well, was heard to remark angrily, “Far too many fingers are destroyed in that factory!”²⁸

Although Moa Martinsson indeed follows in Maria Sandel’s footsteps, she does not show the same strong streak of feminism, Åke Runnquist points out. Her focus is on the women, their work and their relationships with their men, who always tend to be somewhat evasive and unreliable. The women are the ones who are forced to take responsibility, to feed the children and mind and foster them. They are the unsung heroes of home and workplace. Moa Martinsson is also in Runnquist’s opinion without peer in Swedish literature when it comes to describing proletarian everyday existence.²⁹

Elsa Appelquist, on the other hand, is not at all as well known as the other writers in this selection. But she wrote on the basis of her experience as a worker at L M Ericsson in Stockholm, so she has a great deal to tell about working life and the psychosocial environment. She was also active in the trade union, with a position of trust in one of the largest shop unions in the country. She wrote only one novel, *Krig med räknesticka* (The Slide-rule War), in which she depicts the people and the working conditions in the factory, giving a vital portrayal of female and male factory work in a large Swedish enterprise with a Taylorist work organisation in the period between the wars.

The workers in the book carry out ordinary precision-tool work without demand for professional competence. Her account deals with their everyday and emotional life as women and men. She also closely describes trade union work, with its rounds of meetings and negotiations. She is opposed to unmotivated work discipline, malicious supervisors and humiliating time-and-motion studies. In her work she amply demonstrates how Taylorism was applied, how consciously “the brain” was separated from “the hand”. Because of this, she concluded, workers became worn out ahead of time. Her criticism is particularly telling, coming as it did from the inner circles of the Stockholm branch of the Social Democratic Party. But she also writes about the differences between workers, the ones who acquiesced and allowed themselves to be treated in this way and the ones who protested. Her demand was for co-determination. At the same time, she believed it would be difficult to change factory work in any fundamental way.³⁰

The poet Stig Sjödin’s writing is about work, the division of labour and worker consent. In his work, he branded the Taylorist control system and, together with Fridell, he was responsible for the renewal of proletarian poetry. He was himself

²⁸ Martinsson (1991) p 145.

²⁹ Runnquist (1952) p 140.

³⁰ Appelquist (1949). See also Kågerman (1961).

a steelworker and his father worked in the rolling mill at Sandviken Ironworks, and this is the working environment he portrayed. He was a man close to life. What is special about Sjödin's poetry is that, like Fridell, he not only deals with management's authoritarianism and capriciousness, but also just as sharply criticises the workers' narrowness of outlook and treatment of other, deviant workers.³¹ His breakthrough came with *Sotfragment* (Soot) in 1949, a collection that contains many of his typical poems, sharp, vibrant and self-explanatory.

Folke Fridell

When Folke Fridell's second book, *Död mans hand* (Dead Man's Hand) came out in 1946, it received a great deal of attention and also roused a great deal of indignation in some people.³² There was no mistaking that the writer of this book was a well-read worker, a person who had processed his experiences from definite political viewpoints. Folke Fridell was a card-carrying Syndicalist. But that upset no one. The market for proletarian literature had grown rapidly and many authors – Eyvind Johnsson, Ivar Lo-Johansson, etc – were established figures. What upset some people was what took place in the book and what the characters thought and spoke about. The novel lacked respectfulness and held a challenging tone. This was something new. Fridell poked fun at the belief in advancement. He criticised the Swedish welfare state and its ideology.

The action takes place on several levels. It is not only a treatise on factory life. Criticism of industrialism is not a dominating aspect. Rather it deals with the main character's self-esteem and his situation as a father and worker. He is a bit of a failure, his best years behind him. He and his family are like most other ordinary people – mostly decent, somewhat limited perhaps, and with a few minor idiosyncrasies. But David Bohm is viewed as peculiar.

The book became famous as the book where a worker on a night shift says that one ought to “be part of the sharing and the decision-making”. These words about the demand for co-determination are later repeated in *Rivar-Bohm* (Fighter Bohm) when, as newly elected trade union representative, he takes part in negotiations with management. His statement causes the other workers embarrassment and the Director to quite lose his aplomb. In the book, a wildcat strike also breaks out after Bohm's son, Urban, who was another type of person and more hot-tempered, knocks down a time study man and is fired as a punishment. The other workers demand his reinstatement.³³

In his next novel *Greppet hårdnar* (The Tightening Grip) in 1948, a free follow-up to *Dead Man's Hand*, Fridell launched a counterattack against his

³¹ Sund (1999).

³² The whole debate is discussed in *Rivar-Bohm*, “rörelsen” och människovärdet, in *Klartext* (1972).

³³ *Död mans hand* (1989 edition).

critics, giving a more profound exposition of his viewpoint and embellishing his criticism of factory life in the welfare state. He allows his critics to present their case by organising a number of evening debate sessions, convened by the local dentist. During these sessions, he juxtaposes the arguments with each other and lets *Rivar-Bohm*, now even called *Skrivar-Bohm* (Writer Bohm), be backed up by the other textile workers. Fridell holds up the two worlds to view – the world of the worker and the world of the elite, represented by the upper crust of the region. They attempt to get him to see the error of his ways. Why not leave the factory? they ask. He is even offered a job as a travelling salesman. The well-to-do wholesalers at the meeting say, You can't improve the factories, rationalisations must be made.

The discussions become antagonistic. What does Bohm really want? Changing the owner of the machine won't help, they say, the relationship between leader and led will be recreated and new elites will appear. Bohm waves all such protests aside, but it is not as easy to handle the criticism of his workmates. The way you write is too difficult, David, it really isn't all that bad, is it? and, Don't you like your job? Or, why do you make women look so bad? asks a female workmate. At one meeting, he has to contend with criticism from Communists. Look, David, what you've written is mostly crap. You haven't put in a single class-conscious worker. What you have is just a bunch of farmyard hens that don't know what they want. You don't even respect honest labour!

This criticism puzzles Bohm. He thinks: They want heroes, of course, heroes with holy ideas in their lucid brains... His criticism of the Social-Democratic leaders is harsh and he doesn't think much of the works council. He thinks it is a bluff. Bohm is elected to the works council at the factory but does not fit in there. The lack of freedom around me, Bohm thinks, has just become a little tighter. The grip has hardened. I've pulled a little on the leash, perhaps a little more than others have, and the barbs only cut deeper if you're obstinate. But come obediently to heel at the side of your master and the slave leash hangs slack and comfortable around your throat.³⁴

In *Syndfull skapelse* (Sinful Creation) also published in 1948, Fridell focuses on the workers' existential need for freedom. The plot deals with an ordinary worker who finally revolts. The factory worker, Konrad Johnsson, decides to go AWOL, to take a "creative week". Of course, this turns everyone against him – family, employer and trade union. His rather modest demand for freedom goes against the grain of welfare state principles, the Protestant ethic, and existing industrial agreements.³⁵ In this way, Fridell shows how trapped everyone, irrespective of gender and position in society, was in their conventions of how a factory worker and family supporter ought to be. He should go to his job every

³⁴ See Sund (1999) p 124.

³⁵ Ibid.

day, hold his peace, and not be difficult. He should not revolt and absolutely not carry out a personal revolt at the expense of others. They, at any rate, had to go on working.

In the post-war period, the books about Rivar-Bohm and his world contributed to a deepening of the debate on the social aspects of industrial work. The “social issue” of the 1880s re-emerged, the problems of working life clearly evident. The actors of the historical bloc (the SAF and the LO) tried to redress these problems, among other things by coming to the agreement on work councils. Industry was booming, but the workers were still not happy with conditions and job turnover was high. Why? It could hardly just have to do with the small pay increases? Fridell had an answer, but was not taken seriously. His vision was “dark” and his solution “too speculative”. Job satisfaction, the working environment and the consequences of rationalisation needed to be studied scientifically, it was said. This happened soon enough, in the epoch-making sociological study of family and working life in Katrineholm and Husqvarna, carried out under the leadership of Torgny T Segerstedt and Agne Lundquist. The main questions, related to the waning agricultural society, were: What are the values upheld by workers in the industrial society? How do they enjoy their work? How do they live and how well are they integrated into the industrial society?

The self-taught Fridell was suspicious of this research effort, his view being that humans were not geometrical figures but living flesh and blood. When the reports, *Människan i industrisamhället* (Man in the Industrial Society)³⁶, were published in 1952 and in 1955, Fridell wrote a whole novel, *Bjälken i ögat* (The Beam in Thine Eye), to prove the limitations of sociology when it came to describing and understanding human actions. In spite of the sociologists’ good intentions, he maintained, their questionnaires seldom put the right questions. Without having worked in a factory oneself, how could one understand what it was like to work in a factory?³⁷

The Debate in the Clothing and Textile Industry

Working conditions after the war provoked more debate and there were many sharp critics. Among these, we can count in varying degrees Fridell, Sjödin and Appelquist. On the other side were those who defended the prevailing situation – the historical bloc’s actors in industry (employers and trade union representatives, and especially certain intellectuals who will be discussed in more detail below). And of course, there were all those who had no proper opinion at all. It is especially interesting to follow the debate that arose within Fridell’s own territory, the Union of Swedish Textile Workers. In their trade journal, *Beklädnadsfolket* (People in Textiles), the editor Gösta A Svensson, who had grown up in a textile

³⁶ Segerstedt and Lundquist eds (1952, 1955).

³⁷ Ibid.

workers' home in Lerum outside Gothenburg, wrote a signed editorial in the October issue of 1947. Under the heading, "Job satisfaction must be sought on the job – not outside it," he addressed the question of how to regain job satisfaction in labour and handicrafts. His own answer was that the worker must above all be given wages that would allow him to decently support his family. Further, the worker must be valued in an entirely different way than at present and this should be done within the framework of industrial democracy. "The worker should not feel that he is an anonymous creature, a mere complement to all the technological wonders." Everyone must understand that the seamstress is as important as the seller of the suit.³⁸

To start with, Gösta A Svensson did not quite take sides; rather he took a stance close to Fridell's programme. A year later, however, in 1948, after *The Tightening Grip* had been published, Svensson again wrote an editorial on the subject of "Man and the Machine". Here he attacked Fridell for one-sidedness, because Fridell, "the most aggressive of them all", had said that "there is no longer freedom of movement in the workplace for the functioning people". But in Svensson's opinion the general public had "heard the emotional, the problematic and the intellectually stimulating, but all too seldom the arguments of the people who actually on a daily basis are on the battlefield of industrial labour."

He continued to refute Fridell's viewpoint that the worker in modern industry lacked human dignity:

"To assert this is to deny the results of the labour movement's half century of struggle on the trade union and political front-lines. It is also untrue that the workers of today are merely tamed and obedient tools. And finally, it is untrue that workers, timid and silently submissive, acquiesce to everything. No, Folke Fridell, the workers can speak on their own behalves! Are they speechless at the many and complicated negotiations of labour market agreements? Do not workers have the opportunity to make their opinions known in the discussions of the safety committees' and the works councils' many hints of unsolved problems in the workplace? The problem of well-being touches every individual worker. But we all have different temperaments, different ways of thinking, acting and reacting. Generalisation, whether rough or infinitely well polished, will therefore not lead to the truth."³⁹

Before this piece, quite opposed to Fridell, was written, the working environment and workers' well-being had been discussed at the 17th Congress of the Union of Swedish Textile Workers in 1947. The reason was a motion put forward by the Örebro branch of the union concerning the "race to break records" in in-

³⁸ See Sund (1991) p 64 ff.

³⁹ Ibid.

dustry. The motion was written by Margit Persson, who later became a journalist at the Social-Democratic newspaper, *Örebro Kuriren*. As a result of machine technology, modern rationalisation techniques and time-motion studies, the human material was being used mercilessly, the motion said. “The statistics already show an increase in neurotic ailments, especially among the female industrial workers.” The branch wanted the executive board of the union to

“investigate the issue of the complications that the general frenzy of the labour market seems to be causing and together with LO attempt to arrive at suitable measures for creating better protection for the human material.”

At the congress Margit Persson said

“For a long time, we have, in industry, both functioned as machines and been treated like machines. In the event that the machine slaves ever raised a voice in protest, the answer has been an exposition of the blessings of rationalisation. We are not against rationalisation as such, but human beings must not be allowed to be passively mechanised in the extreme rush of the times.”

She also appealed directly to the full-time employee functionaries of the union: “Even those who have recently abandoned the battlefield to bring home a richer harvest seem not to want to understand that the risks of mechanisation are greater for assembly-line workers than for others.”

Margit Persson then went on to identify the reasons:

“The workers themselves are often the cause behind the stress. They stretch themselves to the limit to achieve the greatest possible earnings. Adaptation to the killing pace of the assembly line varies of course from person to person, but one thing they have in common, is an aversion to the dictatorial style and ownership structure of the firms and their attitude to the workers. Many times, it seems strange that they can maintain the ironclad discipline. Take a look at the fifty year-olds with their shaky hands, the ones we can call the first machine-man generation.”

Gösta A Svensson, on the presiding committee, immediately asked to speak at the end of Margit Persson’s presentation. The works councils, he said, that had recently been introduced would take up the problems of industry, including the problems of the well-being of their workers. What was important was to “put the right person in the right place” and to “make use of all the collected knowledge”, as well as “listen to experience as represented by workers with many years of training.” One must do “everything possible to create a new spirit, which shall have co-operation and not despotism as its main characteristic.” People must be placed in the centre of attention!

This was followed by a statement from the chairperson of the union, Per Pettersson, to the effect that textile workers as a whole did not at all consider themselves to be like slaves, oppressed by the machine. “In the many years that I myself was employed in this industry, none of us at least ever felt that way. We were well aware of our own worth.” But a debate on these issues is of great value, both useful and necessary, he told Margit Persson and the rest of the auditorium.

After a number further of contributions for and against, however, the motion was rejected.⁴⁰

An important indication of the significance and level of this debate on the well-being and co-determination of workers was the publication in 1949 of the book, *Blodprov på arbetsglädje: hur det känns att arbeta – kroppsarbetare ser på sig själva och sitt arbete* (A blood test of job satisfaction: Workers’ views of themselves and their work). The 34 essays in the book were written by workers studying at the LO folk high school, Brunnsvik. These all rejected Fridell’s theories. In his foreword, Torvald Karlbom, intellectual, historian and principal at Brunnsvik, wrote that the problem of well-being had always existed, but only now – when the labour supply was scarce – had this problem begun to demand notice.⁴¹ The editor of *Beklädnadsfolket*, Gösta Svensson, asked three workers to review the book for his paper (May 1949). According to one of them, Karin Mårdh, the content of the book suggested that the Swedish worker had taken a quite sensible view of the issue. She went on,

“After Fridell, it was refreshing to get one’s hands on this book. For while his *Rivar-Bohm* made me wonder how I could have worked for 20 years in the textile industry without being aware that I was really in an infernal limbo; Karlbom’s little book came and restored the balance. I realised that there wasn’t something wrong with me.”⁴²

But the choice of essays and reviewers had clearly been somewhat “skewed”, because in the September issue of the newspaper, Svensson returned with the results of two questionnaire surveys, as well as a new editorial entitled “The textile workers and well-being”. In one of the surveys, a Gallup poll undertaken on behalf of the textile industry, 2,000 randomly chosen women had been asked to give their views on the textile profession as compared to other jobs. The results were very clear: only six per cent could see any bright spots in the textile job compared to working as a maid or a shop girl. Mainly, it was considered “socially degrading” to be a textile worker.

In the other survey of 1,293 persons in five towns, of which 331 were textile workers, the results were less clear. The unanimous opinion among the respon-

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Karlbom ed (1949).

⁴² Sund (1991) p 70.

dents, however, was that work in the textile industry was unhealthy and tending to be associated with tuberculosis. Otherwise, the majority of these textile workers said that they were happy with their jobs and their workplaces.

Svensson summarised these contradictory results as follows:

“The entire basis for well-being at work is formed by a combination of different factors. But one fact remains. The job of a textile worker, despised by the general public, is far more appreciated by the workers themselves.”

In his opinion, the public at large had not understood that much had changed within the textile industry. “The sins of old employers and 19th century attitudes still haunt the public mind.” While the situation was not as Folke Fridell had described it, this did not mean, however, that everything was all right. There were many problems yet to be solved.⁴³

The peak of the discussion about the well-being of workers and job satisfaction in the clothing and textile industry was reached when *Beklädnadsfolket* and the branch journals *Textil och Konfektion* (Clothing and Textiles) and *Textile Information* organised a conference in the beginning of November, 1949, to which employer, supervisor and worker representatives were invited. In a document, *Trivseln i arbetet* (Well-being at Work) published after the conference in 1950, K A Billum, the editor of one of the branch journals, wrote in summary of the conference:

“What is needed now are not alarm clocks and pointers [this addressed to Fridell who was not at the conference or in any way involved]. What is needed is contact with the parties on the labour market, an open and realistic discussion between the workers, employers and supervisors in different branches, out there in the factories.”

He established that national research was needed about relationships in the workplace. “This is a question of basic research, which can be placed at the disposal of the works councils of whom we hope so much.”⁴⁴

The Debate in the Engineering Industry

Around 1950, many contributions both for and against the proletarian writers’ descriptions of working life and the working environment appeared in the press as well as in the various forums for debate. Editors and other intellectuals, e.g. school principals, were the ones who foremost responded to these writers’ criticisms and in this way rose to the defence of the views of the historical bloc. In *Industria*, the organ of the Swedish Employers’ Confederation, an illuminating debate flared up between Alf Ahlberg – a person schooled in philosophy who had

⁴³ Ibid p 70 ff.

⁴⁴ Ibid p 72.

been a principal at Brunnsvik and there taught many trade union leaders – and Stig Sjödin. *Industria* commanded a leading position on general cultural-sociological working-life issues. In his first sally, entitled “The industrial worker in fiction and fact”, Ahlberg took a philosophically optimistic developmental perspective, claiming that the industrial march forward that had solved the basic human problem of scarce resources was unavoidable and in fact totally necessary. He felt the proletarian writers’ criticisms to be an expression of nostalgia for the old society, but there was no way back.

He continued: “Only in a romantic or quixotic fable could a return be possible.” There was therefore every reason “to take as sceptical a view of the current idealisation of handicraft production as of the current demonisation of modern industrial production.” He welcomed proletarian creativity but considered that the perspective of these writers was skewed and the picture they painted too black. They had generalised on the basis of individual cases and built their theories on faulty preconceptions of modern rationalisation and the tendencies that characterised modern industry and its leaders. The proletarian writers had not understood that the principles of scientific management could also benefit workers.

He found the proletarian writers pessimistic. He could possibly find a few bright spots in Elsa Applequist, but not in Fridell and Sjödin. In their case, this was very hard. He had especial difficulty with Sjödin’s Sandviken poems and in particular the one about a time-study man that had smeared the whole profession. This dark view could be found in Fridell as well. *Rivar-Bohm* saw only the misery and the meaninglessness around himself. Principal Ahlberg became indignant and felt that there existed a deep-seated prejudice which this writing further attempted to substantiate and hammer home – that the increased mechanisation of the work process would generally make work more soulless and reduce it to a mere series of monotonous, repetitive movements. This type of job was considered, he said – alluding to the unenlightened general opinion – not to demand any intellectual or mental qualifications and might just as well be performed by a “trained gorilla”. In point of fact, Ahlberg said, there were many tasks in modern, highly rationalised industry that demanded high qualifications of the worker and it was a moot question whether these were labouring jobs or not.⁴⁵

Sjödin’s reply a few issues later was somewhat defensive. He retreated a bit in the face of Ahlberg’s criticism, but held his ground that content and poetic license were impossible to separate. The one could not exist without the other. But if dissatisfaction with industrial work was limited to “a couple of writer freaks” then the discussion could be concluded at once. This was not the case, however. On the contrary, it was more likely that many people were unhappy with their situations. This was suggested by the results of the Gallup poll. What the proletarian writers were doing was trying to broaden the perspective and not only dis-

⁴⁵ Sund (1993) pp 64-65.

cuss the matter of well-being at work. There was a wider sociological issue involved, including the need to be creative in a modern industrial context with an increasing number of assembly lines. It is possible, wrote Sjödin, that the proletarian writers had been somewhat naive in performing their task but hardly more.⁴⁶

In his response to this reply, Ahlberg limited himself to noting that he and Sjödin were in agreement on a number of different points, namely, that technological development was unavoidable, that a return to pure craftsmanship would mean that the majority of the population would starve, that rationalisation was a continuation of technological development, and that a nationalisation of production was not a panacea for all ills.⁴⁷

This debate was also waged among the workers themselves. At the vast export firm of L M Ericsson in Stockholm where Elsa Appelquist worked, several contributions were published in the company newspaper *Kontakten* during 1950 and 1951. The first was by Elis Lanz, engineer and chair of the engineers' shop union (SIF). He asked structured questions about why people were not happy in their workplaces and suggested the following four main reasons: One, the workplace itself, i.e. the working environment in its broadest sense; two, the individual; three, disagreements with management; four, capriciousness and intolerance in workplace relations.

He then discussed these different explanations and drew the conclusion that the problem was in the human relationships. It seemed to him that the different parties in the workplace had begun to discover each other as human beings – an interesting developmental phase, in his view. He proposed that the different parties in the workplace should begin to communicate in an open and honest manner. “In doing so, one should begin with the ambition to achieve what is right and get away from the feeling of who should win.” “Prestige,” he declared, “should be left at home.”⁴⁸

In the next issue a contribution by the metalworker Karl Ivre was published that took up the thread of the ongoing debate with the proletarian authors. His opinion was that one should absolutely not turn them into some kind of “job-satisfaction executioners”. Dissatisfaction at the workplace had been discussed long before the voices of the 1940s had had a chance to make themselves heard. On the other hand, they had achieved an intensification of the debate by showing the “other side of the coin,” as Fridell expressed it. Karl Ivre wondered how the production and consumption factor, humanity, would have fared at a time when the technological-organisational system was developing fast.

Karl Ivre also shared his views on a newly completed “satisfaction” questionnaire carried out at L M Ericsson. He found the differences in the responses to

⁴⁶ Ibid p 67.

⁴⁷ Ibid p 67.

⁴⁸ Ibid pp 67-68.

the general questions and the detailed questions interesting. Eighty per cent of the responses to the general questions suggested that people felt extremely well, well, or mostly well at the factory. But when the questions touched on free opinions or got into details, the answers became more critical. Karl Ivre wondered whether this did not point to methodological problems in the Gallup polls. The truth, he felt, did not really emerge.⁴⁹

Kontakten closed the debate by reporting from a talk held by the Social Democratic cabinet minister Sven Andersson, later Party Secretary and Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the subject of industrial production and worker well-being. This talk showed how important these matters were considered to be by the leading actors in the ruling historical bloc at this time. In his talk on “Our economic situation”, Andersson pointed out that the problem of well-being had become an issue because there was a state of full employment in the country. Firms were being pressured to enhance the well-being of their personnel in order to keep them. He also said that modern research had shown that it was most difficult to solve the problem of well-being and adaptability within the larger units of big enterprises, into which category Ericsson fell, but that a suitable work organisation could counteract the unfavourable social and psychological consequences of company rationalisations. He even discussed the relations between supervisors and personnel and said that a good spirit in the workplace depends most often on the ability of management and supervisors to lead the work and retain contact with the workers.⁵⁰

Concluding Remarks

The post-war years were an unsettled time. Sweden, which had been neutral in the war, had escaped the extensive damage experienced by many other countries, where many people had suffered and died. Yet working life had been affected by the war and it took some time before everything settled into “back to business as usual”. But in Sweden, production capacity was intact and industry was going full blast. Conditions were very different from those in countries that had participated in the war. Towards the end of the war, a political radicalisation had taken place in Europe. These Leftist winds also swept over Sweden, leading to the adoption in 1944 of a radical new programme by the ruling Social Democratic Party, who had formed a coalition government with other democratic parties during the war.

In spite of the positive situation in Sweden, an aura of pessimism began to spread in writers’ circles. The era of the atomic bomb and the possibility of a new – atomic – war threw its sharp shadow over their reasoning and their writing. Even the proletarian writers were caught up in this overriding spirit of the times.

⁴⁹ Ibid p 68.

⁵⁰ Ibid pp 68-69.

Folke Fridell, in the view of Olof Lagercrantz, dreamt the nightmare of the robot society – the nightmare of Huxley and Orwell.⁵¹ Conditions in society were contradictory to say the least. In industry everything was going well and there was no lack of work. At the same time, there was anxiety over the state of the world, with the war so recently over, and there was fear that a coming robotic society would follow on the industrial one. Criticism of industrial work had been raised earlier, but not like now. Fridell's, Sjödin's and Appelquist's portrayals must be seen against this backdrop of the times. Factory work, according to these proletarian writers, was soulless and degrading. The workers were oppressed and unhappy. The Taylorist work organisation implied this lack of well-being and was therefore strongly attacked by Fridell and Sjödin. Fridell even demanded real co-determination for the workers. In this he levelled criticism at the 1946 work councils agreement between the SAF and the LO.

The problem for the actors of the historical bloc was obvious. Their opinion was that industry must be as efficient as possible. One guarantee of this was the Taylorist production method, which could therefore not be discarded. Further, they were aware that rules were needed to facilitate co-operation between the parties on the labour market, but they could not be as far-reaching as Fridell demanded; that would be too much. The Social Democrats, who had gained an even stronger position after the war, also came up against stiff political opposition from the conservative forces as they attempted to push through their new, radical programme. The party was therefore forced to a retreat. It was in this situation that Fridell and Sjödin put forward their criticisms, and the leading forces in the historical bloc had to try to deflect their criticism or silence them. When that did not work, the solution instead became the broad sociological survey undertaken at the beginning of the 1950s. This would hold the answers. But even this effort on the part of the historical bloc was criticised by Fridell, who considered that the survey did not manage to uncover the true problems.

It is interesting to note by whom and the way in which Fridell and Sjödin were criticised. Functionaries – intellectuals – within the labour movement mainly took up the debate. In their philosophy, the prevailing order could not be changed; development was unavoidable. The proletarian writers' criticisms did not directly lead to any new reforms. But they certainly stimulated the efforts made to produce a more effective regulation scheme for occupational safety and sickness benefits. The proletarian writers could therefore be said to have had a "blow-torch" effect, while the labour movement could retain the approbation of their members. The development of welfare continued and the workers largely accepted Taylorism, until the miners finally staged the great revolt against this military structure in 1969-70. There would then be a delay of two decades before the labour movement took the necessary steps to reform working life (co-determina-

⁵¹ Lagercrantz (1978) p 60.

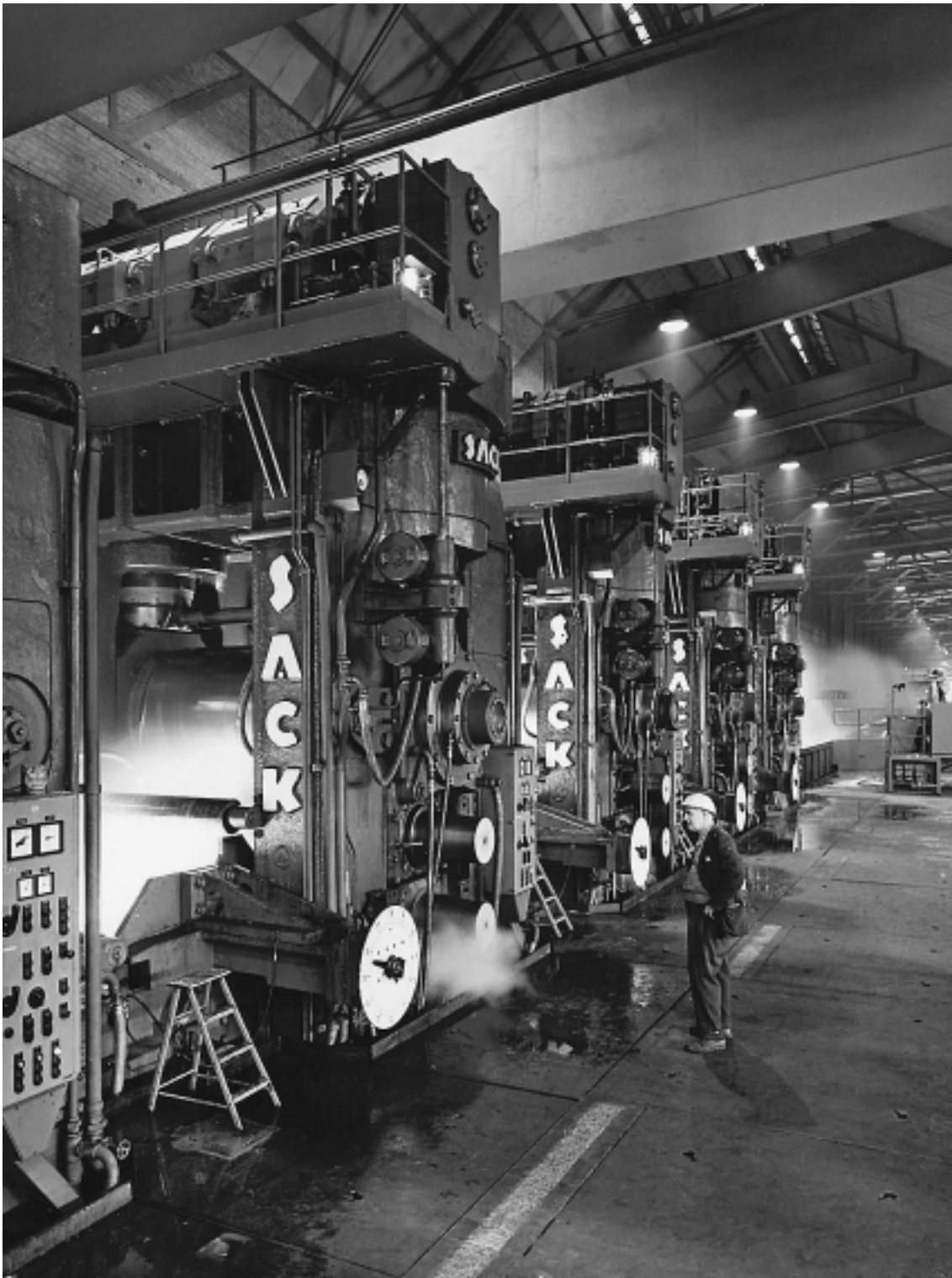
tion, occupational safety and new working environment regulations). But the criticisms that were raised against working life regulations were essentially grounded in Fridell's and Sjödin's literary portrayals. This is something that has not been adequately pointed out earlier. What has mainly been underlined is the revolt of the 1968 generation, the Leftist winds of change and the miners' strike.

While it is hard to prove the direct importance of the proletarian writers for the development of occupational safety, the working environment and working life, as they were hardly actors in that sense, they did initiate the extensive debate concerning problems of working life that took place both within and outside the trade unions around 1950. Their opponents in the debate were intellectuals who were often affiliated to the leading historical bloc – men operating in the service of the trade union movement. The debate in turn increased general awareness of how people experienced their workplaces. But no decisive changes were made until the 1970s, when the industrial society began to fade away. For even if the will to change existed within the labour movement, the leading forces felt for a long time that it would be unwise to jeopardise the survival of the bloc by entering into fundamental discussions of a change in labour legislation and work organisation. This discussion was therefore not treated seriously until the 1970s, 20-25 years after the proletarian writers' had published their novels.

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The broad band works at Domnarvet. Source: Svenska Metallindustriarbetareförbundets arkiv, Stockholm.