

Sweden: regional safety representatives, a model that is unique in Europe

Does Sweden, with its famous "social model", still represent the example to be followed? When it comes to preventing occupational risks, the answer remains Yes. The country is successfully carrying on an experiment which began over 60 years ago. Over 2,000 regional safety representatives, appointed by the trade unions, are making sure that "prevention" is not just an empty word in SMEs.

Hans Olof Wiklund

Work environment reporter, Tema Arbetsmiljö AB

A Scania truck assembly line. The culture of workplace risk prevention is long-established in big Swedish firms, but less so in SMEs where regional safety reps operate.

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Most of the regional safety representatives' activities are made up of routine tasks in everyday working life in Sweden. But even that can sometimes have far-reaching consequences. One memorable example occurred in 1994, when Transport Workers' Union regional safety representative Gerhard Wendt examined plans for the conversion of Shell's petrol station in the Rosengård area of Malmö: it ended in a government decision and a changed attitude to the risk of being exposed to third-party violence, and to solitary work.

Gerhard Wendt, who started as a regional safety representative in 1986, reacted immediately when he saw Shell's plans. The idea was that the petrol station in Rosengård would be open 24 hours a day, with only one employee working at night. This was an area with gang problems and other problems even then, so both the station manager and his employees were worried.

He tried to negotiate double staffing, but Shell consistently refused. In autumn 1997 he gave up negotiating and requested intervention by the then Labour Inspectorate under the provisions of the Work Environment Act. The Labour Inspectorate flatly prohibited solitary work, but Shell appealed to the National Board of Occupational Safety and Health (now the Swedish Work Environment Authority, *Arbetsmiljöverket*), which agreed to solitary work if sales between 22.00 and 6.00 were conducted through a night-time pass-through window and with a locked entry door. The regional safety reps appealed this decision to the government. The government decision was something of

a compromise: no solitary work at all, regardless of the time of day, without a pass-through window and locked entrance.

The case-law in Shell

At that time, when the decision was announced, Gerhard Wendt was disappointed. "Yes, we wanted no solitary work at all and were aiming for double staffing", he says. Now, more than ten years later, he notes that the Shell station in Rosengård was a pilot case. It paved the way for a long series of prohibitions by the Swedish Work Environment Authority against solitary work at different petrol stations unless the night-time pass-through window requirement was met. Employee safety and reducing the risk of robbery and third-party violence were regarded then and now as more important than the employers' interest in keeping down staffing costs or avoiding safety-enhancing investments. And that view has spread to other industries and operations, such as all-night 7-Eleven stores.

"Gerhard Wendt? Yes, he influenced supervision in the entire country with his actions in Rosengård", says Professor Kaj Frick, formerly active in the now closed National Institute for Working Life. "That was an exceptional event, but the main thing is nevertheless what regional safety representatives achieve in their ordinary, daily work", he says. "That is what brings the greatest benefit." Asked to specify the extent of this benefit, Kaj Frick notes that the task is more or less impossible. "There are no measurements of 'the benefit' of safety representatives' activities,

no research about it either, that I know of. The chains of cause and effect, the time between action and result, are long, and there are also strong incidental impulses such as cyclical fluctuations and technological breakthroughs. To get an idea of the benefit you have to rely on assessments instead of measurements", he explains.

"Work-related ill health is very expensive; it is usually estimated to be equivalent to 3-4 per cent of gross domestic product. The risk level is greater for small companies because they are not as good at dealing with their risks. So relatively small efforts there should have a great effect, and be extremely beneficial", believes Mr Frick, who is now professor of OHS Management and a researcher at Mälardalen university. "And those who reach these small companies are the regional safety representatives. If they can get something to happen there, such as setting up training, systematic work environment management or a discussion on getting rid of overtime so that employees don't get burnt out, well, then, they are bringing great benefit", he adds.

350,000 workplaces covered

Sweden has had safety representatives since 1912. The trade union organisations have been able to appoint regional safety representatives (RSRs) since 1949, but at that time there were several kinds of constraint. Only when the old Workers' Protection Act was modernised in 1974 were these constraints removed, and the system of regional safety

representatives extended. The Act, which since 1977 has been called the Work Environment Act, differentiates between different safety representatives. All safety representatives have the same status as trade union representatives and the same statutory rights as regards action on work environment matters.

It is always the local trade union organisation that appoints safety representatives. But while "ordinary" safety representatives are appointed to act within an area of supervision at their own workplace, an RSR is appointed to act within a certain area of supervision identified through industrial sector or agreement and often works in a geographically delimited area. RSRs work almost exclusively with small and medium-sized enterprises and operations, with up to 50 employees.

"In 2009, which is the most recent year for which we have figures available, there were 1,185 regional safety representatives in 13 affiliates of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO). Their activities affected 273,757 workplaces and 612,125 members and other employees. The LO affiliates' regional safety representatives made 74,181 workplace visits during the year. This can be compared with the approximately 30,000 workplace inspection visits made by the Swedish Work Environment Authority in the same period. And the Work Environment Authority never or

hardly ever reaches really small enterprises, with 1-20 employees", says Christina Järnstedt, the coordinator for the LO affiliates' regional safety representatives' activities and the Swedish trade union representative on the Advisory Committee for Health and Safety in Luxembourg, a body aimed at assisting the European Commission in the preparation and implementation of decisions taken in the field of safety and health at work.

The other central trade union organisations, the Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO) and the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (Saco), also conduct RSR activities. Together they have over 600 regional safety representatives and deal with about 80,000 workplaces. Swedish RSR activities are to a great extent government funded, but the various trade unions have to contribute a substantial (and growing) amount themselves to ensure the functioning of the activities.

The amendments to the Work Environment Act in the 1970s gave regional safety representatives two main tasks: monitoring employers' compliance, and endeavouring to get employees to participate in local health and safety work. The preparatory work for the 1974 legislation also emphasised the importance of the regional safety representatives activating local health and safety work.

Kick-starters

How the assignments are carried out, as well as how the activities are organised, can vary between different national trade union organisations and over time. In my interviews with different regional safety representatives, with representatives for trade union organisations and employer organisations, and with researchers and work environment inspectors, there were, however, a few things that came up again and again. The regional safety representatives are seen as distributors of news and knowledge, kick-starters, mediators, mentors, advisers and consultants. They are the contacts that note and sound the

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"Quite often a safety representative will need help when they reach a deadlock locally", says Göran Wattenberg, regional safety representative for the Swedish Building Maintenance Workers' Union in Gothenburg. "We come in from outside and it can then be easier to set a process in motion and get something to happen." "But as a regional safety representative I can't arrange everything, and that may sometimes be difficult for people to understand", says Eva Pålsson, the regional safety representative for the Municipal Workers' Union in the Scania province (southern tip of the Scandinavian peninsula).

"Obviously I have gathered experience and knowledge over all these years, and I can give them suggestions and help them to get going, but they have to do the spadework themselves locally. That needs training, for both the members and the employers. Training, initiating systematic work environment management at workplaces and supporting the local safety representatives are some of the most important tasks", points out Eva Pålsson. "Let the safety representatives grow and blossom, that's my private philosophy. I don't disappear just because I let others come to the fore."

Jan Johansson works with work environment matters at the employers' organisation Almega. "I think it's a hard job being a regional safety representative, especially at new companies", he says. "It requires a good knowledge of human nature, and the ability to listen. As a safety representative you must be tough when necessary, yet it is important to show humility.

The most important thing is to get employers and employees to interact", he points out.

The RSRs I have spoken to emphasise that most employers want a safe and secure workplace with a good work environment, but many lack sufficient knowledge. "We have examples of companies with between 50 and 70 employees where no one at the company has any basic knowledge of work environment issues", says Göran Wattenberg, regional safety representative for the Swedish Building Maintenance Workers' Union. "And we have 'sold' work environment training for both managers and employees at several such companies."

Never seriously questioned

Kenn Nilsson, regional safety representative for IF Metall, the Swedish Industrial and Metalworkers' Union, in central Scania, has similar experiences. "We devote a lot of work to training the local safety representatives, but we also provide training for managers at the companies", he explains. Gunnar Rosén, Professor of Work Science at Dalarna University, has worked on several projects examining health and safety work in small companies. "The regional safety representatives are an extremely important source of knowledge for small enterprises", he notes.

Knowledge of local conditions, understanding of production and operating conditions are important for RSR activities. Ingvar Lindahl started his mechanical engineering workshop in the small city of Eslöv (Scania) in 2008, with four employees and great plans for the future. "Two months after the start came the downturn. I was forced to

give people notice and cancel the purchase of expensive machinery, milling cutters and other things which would have been used in the workshop. It was actually not a matter of a downturn; it was an economic meltdown, a catastrophe. These have been horrible years", he notes, "with all energy devoted to the survival of the company. Work environment issues were not a priority. When anything came up I phoned Mats Pålsson, who is the regional safety representative at IF Metall. I have only good experience of that cooperation. It's easy to talk to him."

The regional safety representative system is now such a matter of course that it has never really been seriously questioned. That is precisely why the question must be asked: Why do we have regional safety representatives in Sweden? "To ensure that trade union health and safety work can also be conducted in small workplaces that do not have their own safety representative or safety committee. Because all employees have the right to safe, secure and fulfilling work", says Christina Järnstedt at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation. ●