INTRODUCTION

Precarious Employment in Perspective

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The Swedish system of industrial relations and welfare has often been depicted as the best in the world, with a well-organised labour market, a safe and inclusive working life and equal and extensive social benefits. In this collection of chapters, we do not intend to radically change this picture, but we want to show that the Swedish labour market and working life have undergone significant changes over the past few decades, changes that have moved the balance between capital and labour in a capital-friendly way.

The focus of this collection is on the development of precarious employment, which refers to various forms of employment that fall below the regular standard norm for an employment relationship. This "standard employment" has been described as "[…] a normative model of employment where the worker has one employer, works full-time, year-round on the employer's premises under his or her supervision, enjoys extensive statutory benefits and entitlements, and expects to be employed indefinitely" (Cranford, Vosko and Zukewich, 2003: 455).

It has become evident internationally, as well as in Sweden, that this standard employment relationship has decreased, and various forms of casual and precarious work have become increasingly common. Concrete expressions of this development are, for example, part-time and fixed-term work, work during unsocial hours, on-call work, homeworking and telecommuting. Other features are disguised employment and other "hybrid" forms of employment in the growing "grey area" between the main categories of employment and self-employment, as well as the use of workers hired through temporary employment agencies (Quinlan et al., 2001; ESOPE, 2004; Frade and Darmond, 2005; Engblom, 2009).

Along with the increase in these forms of employment, the problem of precarious employment has become a topical political issue (ESOPE, 2004). In Sweden, this development has to some extent been mitigated by the social security system. Swedish labour laws cover, in principle, all employees, including those who are employed under typically precar-
ious contracts. The Swedish social insurance system is also far-reaching. For example, it is possible to combine short periods of fixed-term employment with unemployment benefits. Even though the regulations have become considerably stricter in the past few years in order to increase the labour supply, part-time unemployed workers, who actively seek to increase the number of hours they work, are also entitled to unemployment benefits. As Engblom has put it in an international report on labour and social law in Sweden, “outsiders in the labour markets are thus not necessarily outsiders to welfare” (Engblom, 2009: 2).

This, he means, may also explain why there is no Swedish equivalent of the notions of precarious employment or precarious work. Swedish scholars have mainly used the term “atypical work” when referring to forms of employment that deviate from the standard employment relationship. In the public debate, concrete forms of employment, such as fixed-term and part-time work, are often discussed separately. The term “unsecure employment” is generally used to denote fixed-term employment, while “workers with a weak connection to the labour market” mainly refers to the unemployed and people outside the labour market (Engblom, 2009: 2-3).

The contribution of this collection of chapters to the research being carried out into precarious employment is aimed at bringing a historical and international perspective to this problem in Sweden. This development should also be addressed with a multi-disciplinary approach. Another common denominator of the chapters in this collection is that they all include a power relations approach on either the basis of class, gender or ethnicity, or the intersection of these categories.

Historically, the notion of the standard employment relationship can be linked to the employment conditions of the white, male, industrial worker during the economically progressive decades after World War II, and more precisely the period from the 1950s until the mid-1970s. However, even when we talk about this golden era of large-scale industrial development (the heyday of Fordism) this standard employment relationship should be regarded as an ideal type.

Women, in particular, often worked under conditions that deviated from this norm, mainly due to the fact that women had the main responsibility for child-care and household duties. Part-time work and work during unsocial hours were common, for example, in the health care and retail sectors (see chapters by Andersson Bäck and Engstrand). In general, however, people worked as subordinate employees, full-time and year-round.

The drift away from standard employment in recent decades and the emergence of various forms of non-standard employment is connected with the more customer-oriented ways of organising production, work
Annette Thörnquist and Åsa-Karin Engstrand

and business activities in both the private and public sectors. This restructuring has included changes in industrial relations as well. To understand these interrelated current international trends in production, economy and working life, we need a historical perspective, as well as a critical approach.

The international industrial crisis that broke out in the western countries in the 1970s became the starting-point for the development of a new production model within capitalism, including revised or new welfare regimes. In the academic debate, starting in the wake of this crisis, technological change and economic and social restructuring have been discussed in various terms: the “post-industrial society” (Bell 1974); “the second industrial divide” (Piore and Sabel 1984), the “third industrial revolution” (Greenwood, 1997; Magnusson, 1999); the “new economy” (Kelly, 1998; Gordon, 2000); the “information age” and “network society” (Castells, 1996); and the “post-Fordist regime of accumulation” (Aglietta, 1976; Lipietz, 1992; Amin, 1995). Most researchers, or at least those who have a power relations approach, agree that we may talk about the emergence of a new regime in capitalistic development, including not only technical developments (particularly information and communication technology, ICT) but also a fundamental restructuring in the organisation of production and work, as well as an international division of labour. This transformation also includes changes in the mode of regulations in the working life.

Economic and working life restructuring in recent decades has by no means been identical in western countries, which have dealt with the problems linked to this development in various ways as well. At the same time as the discourse on “the new economy” tends to be hegemonic, we can see clear signs of path-dependence in the national strategies for growth, welfare and industrial relations (Sennett, 1998; Esping-Andersen, 1999; Traxler, Blaschke and Kittel, 2001; Koch, 2006). Hence, as working life researchers, we always need to raise questions about continuity and change in long-term development.

At the political-ideological level, neo-liberalism – the obvious follower of the monetarist wave that started in the 1970s – gained ground at the expense of traditional social democratic and social-liberal policy. The imposition of a supply-side economic policy was perhaps the most evident sign of this ideological reorientation, giving priority to tax reductions, wider wage differentials and deregulation rather than domestic demand management (Erixon, 2003; Engstrand, 2007). Another common trend was the decentralisation and individualisation of labour relations and, related to these processes, a weakening of union power (Thörnqvist 1999; Traxler, Blaschke and Kittel, 2001; Thörnquist 2003; 2008).
Even though the international neo-liberal trend also gained ground in Sweden in the 1980s, it was not until the early 1990s that Sweden left the traditional social democratic policy of full employment in favour of a low-inflation policy that harmonised with EU requirements.

In the wake of the international industrial crisis in the 1970s and the early 1980s, a wave of closures occurred in basic industries such as shipyards, mining, and iron and steel industries, leading to vast public measures of support and dramatic structural transformation. At the same time the inflation rate increased. Despite great problems in industry and the economy, general unemployment remained low until the early 1990s. Max Koch has explained this phenomenon from the regulation theoretical approach: “In the 1970s and 1980s, the accumulation regime went into crisis, while the collective actors held on to the full employment-oriented regulatory system” (Koch, 2006: 88). In addition, the expanding public sector absorbed unemployed workers from the industrial sector. As a consequence, the unemployment rate was internationally very low. Still, this was an unstable socio-economic system that involved conflicts in the political arena and in the labour market.

In the early 1990s, however, the change in course resulted in a dramatic increase of the unemployment rate from around two per cent of the workforce in 1990 to around 11 per cent in 1993/1994. At the same time, Sweden faced its deepest international financial crisis since the 1930s. The unemployment rate remained mostly above 10 per cent until 1997, when the economy began to recover. In the recent financial crisis that started in the autumn of 2008, the unemployment rate has risen again, but without approaching the high level of the early 1990s.

The move away from the traditional full-employment and active labour market policy in the 1990s was accompanied by a development towards a “workfare” policy (see Junestav’s chapter). At the same time, union power decreased. The reorientation of the economic policy, and the general development in wage bargaining, including the trends towards individualisation and decentralisation, made it more difficult for unions to pursue the solidaristic wage policy. This meant wage disparities and a more polarised labour market.
Unemployed men and women, as a percentage of the labour force ¹


The traditional, centralised and self-regulated system of Swedish industrial relations had begun to change in the 1980s, following the international trend towards decentralisation of industrial relations, leading also to a decline in union power. By the early 1990s the Swedish Employers’ Confederation, SAF, definitively abandoned centralised bargaining (at the confederate level) and closed down its bargaining department (Thörnqvist, 1999; Kjellberg, 2009). However, as in many other countries with traditionally strong labour relations, the process of decentralisation can be characterised as “organised decentralisation”; the process was forced through by a well-organised and strong national employer association and some remnants of the old centralised system were retained (Traxler, Blaschke and Kittel, 2001). This general trend towards “organised decentralisation” in wage setting, including new forms of coordinating agreements at industry level, has also characterised labour relations in the area of occupational safety and health (Thörnquist, 2003; 2008).

Another important trend in recent years is the decline in union density, especially among young workers in the growing private service sector and among immigrants. This decline, which is an international trend, has thus made large groups of workers more vulnerable, and the union struggle for better wages and working conditions has become

¹ Unemployment rate according to EU regulations.
more difficult in general. Even though union density in Sweden is still very high in international terms (over 70 per cent), a dramatic decline occurred in the years 2007 and 2008 due to changes in the system of union unemployment funds made by the centre-right government (Kjellberg 2009; see also Kjellberg’s chapter). We can also notice that controversies in the labour market are increasingly the result of issues related to employment security and work environment conditions. Another common reason for labour unrest is the problem of wage dumping due to the exploitation of labour migrants in an increasingly internationalised labour market (see chapters by C. Thörnqvist and A. Thörnquist).

As in other western countries, New Public Management, based on management strategies from the private sector, has helped to reconstruct the public sector into a more “flexible” and customer-oriented mode, including privatisation and contracting out (Almqvist, 2006). Today, a large number of workers are subjected to precarious employment work in the public sector (see chapters by M. Andersson and Calleman).

Before introducing the content of this collection, we need to take a closer look at the concept of precarious employment and related concepts, such as the notions of non-standard employment and atypical employment. There are no statutory definitions of these notions, and the meaning of the concepts may vary between different countries. Atypical employment was originally a notion used mainly in statistical studies and as such it involved an empirical evaluation. However, in political as well as academic contexts, all these concepts generally involve a normative evaluation: they refer most often to employment below the standard norm (ESOPE, 2004: 33-46). This is how the concepts are also used in this volume.

It should be said, however, that the notions of non-standard employment and atypical employment need not necessarily mean low wages and little influence over work, or workers feeling subjected to precariousness. In general, well-educated and high-skilled workers, such as consultants, lawyers, ICT experts and journalists, have a comparatively strong position in the labour market, despite fixed-term contracts, part-time work and work on the border between employment and self-employment.

The notion of precarious employment is perhaps the most commonly used concept in international academic studies on the development of various forms of employment below the normal standard. This includes, for example, short tenure, work during unsocial hours, tight timelines, risky work environments and poor legal protection.

In the academic debate, the notion of precarious employment is often discussed as a multi-dimensional phenomenon and cumulative process.
For example, Rodgers (1989) identified four different dimensions of precarity: 1) a *temporal dimension* referring to the degree of certainty over continuing employment and risks of job loss; 2) an *organisational dimension* that focuses on workers’ control over the labour process, working hours, work intensity, pay and the working environment, including the presence or absence of trade unions; 3) an economic *dimension*, referring to the income level and salary progression; and 4) a *social dimension* referring to the degree of legal, collective or customary protection – for example, against unfair dismissal and discrimination, as well as access to regulatory protection through statutory social security benefits covering health, accidents, and unemployment insurance (see also ESOPE 2004: 46).

It is important to find an analytical concept that suits the multifaceted and complex reality in a time of changing employment and working conditions. Some authors in this collection adhere to the definition of precarious employment used by Lewchuk *et al.* (2003: 23), namely “… a cumulative combination of atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits, poor statutory entitlements, job insecurity, short tenure and low wages”. The concept of *casualisation* (used in this collection mainly by Paulina de los Reyes) is also understood as the processes shifting away from regulated and normalised kinds of work to deregulated, unstable and fragmented working practices.

Female workers and immigrants are over-represented among workers subjected to precariousness (Vosko, 2006; Engblom, 2009). In this collection of chapters, we have tried to make some of the problems they may face in the labour market visible. The deregulation and internationalisation of labour markets, and the related increase in labour mobility, have made it easier to exploit underpaid foreign workers for various forms of non-standard jobs (Quinlan, Mayhew and Bohle, 2001; ILO, 2006).

**The Outline of the Book**

A salient feature of the Swedish system of collective bargaining, often highlighted as the most powerful in the world, is that Swedish law does not regulate minimum wages; instead this is dealt with through collective agreements. In the first chapter of this volume, “The Most Powerful Industrial Relations in the World? Pros and Cons of the Swedish Collective Bargaining System in the Light of the Laval Conflict”, Christer Thörnqvist discusses what happens if a company settles another collective agreement with a union that accepts much lower pay or worse working conditions. The Swedish trade union movement has always been comparatively well prepared to meet challenges from multinationals. But, are the same measures effective against the new threat of social
dumping too? Or, to get straight to the point, can the Swedish system maintain its collective bargaining power within the new framework of European Community legislation?

In the chapter, “Trade Unions and Collective Agreements in a Changing World”, Anders Kjellberg explains why Swedish union density still is very high from an international perspective and why it fell dramatically in the years 2007 and 2008, particularly among young and foreign-born employees, both containing a high share of precarious workers. Also, a number of long-term factors pressing union density downwards and militating against union activities are discussed. Kjellberg also presents data on density of employers’ organisations and coverage of collective agreements. Furthermore, he deals with strategies of employers’ associations and the development of power relations between unions and employers. Attention is also paid to the growing internal rifts within each camp between manufacturing and the private services.

The Laval conflict is far from the only labour market conflict in recent years related to the issue of “social dumping”. Some of these conflicts have involved the problem of false (or bogus) self-employment; employment disguised as self-employment in order to circumvent collective agreements, labour law and other employer responsibilities involved in a regular contract of employment. Annette Thörnquist addresses the problem of false self-employment in Sweden from an industrial relations perspective including historical and international aspects as well. The aim of her chapter, “False Self-Employment. A Topical but Old Labour Market Problem is to put a focus on the fundamental problems of false self-employment in the labour market, including how trade unions have approached them. The emphasis is on the intertwined relationship between self-employment as a mode of exploitation and as a strategy for survival. The historical example is taken from the granite stone industry, while the current example refers to development in the construction sector.

In the chapter, “Precarious Employment in Sweden? Care Work and Domestic Work in a Twilight Zone between Public Law and Private Law”, Catharina Calleman discusses various aspects of the regulation of work in private households in Sweden. This chapter focuses on the role of labour market and employment regulation in the production of precarious employment in private households in Sweden. Taking her point of departure in the international discussion on precarious employment, she wishes to illuminate some dimensions of the development in Sweden of domestic work in its public and private forms. The discussion refers to various kinds of work that require low formal education but primarily focuses on two kinds of employment, which have been
subject to fairly recent and much debated regulation: the personal assistance of disabled people and regular domestic services like cleaning, washing or gardening.

Monica Andersson Bäck addresses the problem of tele-working and call centres in her chapter, “Who Cares about the Carer? New Public Management in Sweden – the Case of Health Call Centres”. The objective of the chapter is to describe and analyse the impact of the contradictory and conflicting goals for the telenurses’ working conditions. Andersson Bäck describes the formation and development of health call centres, HCCs, (sjukvårdsrådgivning) and analyses why this system includes contradictory intentions and implications. She also discusses changes in today’s organisation and consumption of service in general, as well as within the healthcare sector in particular.

In the chapter, “Justifying Precarious Employment? The Struggle over Shop Opening Hours”, Åsa-Karin Engstrand addresses the problem of work during unsocial hours in a broad socio-political perspective. During the last 20 years, the Swedish retail industry has become increasingly characterised by long opening hours and expansion of out-of-town shopping. Since the deregulation of shopping hours in 1971, work during unsocial hours has successively become more accepted. Engstrand analyses why the regulation was abolished and why this practice is widely accepted today.

One main political goal of the traditional Swedish model up until the early 1990s was, as mentioned, to make way for full employment by promoting economic growth, but also by enlarging the public sector and implementing labour market programmes as preventive measures. At the same time, several social policy measures were introduced to reduce individuals’ market dependency. Benefits were handed out from the public social security system to people who fell ill, were disabled, were staying home with an infant or a sick child, or were unemployed and seeking a job. The aim of the chapter, “Promoting Employment or Employability? The Move from Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) to Workfare”, written by Malin Junestav, is to discuss the changes in the public labour market policy and social security system in Sweden, which historically have been strongly connected to the ALMP. The main question to be answered in this chapter is where this process originates; are the policy shift and reformed institutions an answer to a real and objectively interpreted “situation”, or do we find the explanations in a shift in a belief system?

The concept of structural discrimination has increasingly been used in social sciences and in political discourses dealing with widespread ethnic inequalities in working life and in society. In her chapter, “Structural Discrimination and Casualised Work. An Intersectional Approach
to (un)Equal Conditions in Swedish Working Life”, Paulina de los Reyes discusses the theoretical implications and usefulness of the concept of structural discrimination in a context of transformed patterns of organising work and increased casualisation of the labour force. In contrast to earlier definitions of the concept of discrimination, a structural understanding stresses the importance of internalised values, norms and routinised practices leading to systematic disadvantages for groups or individuals defined as culturally or ethnically different.

“Precarious Accreditation? Inclusion of Immigrants in Precarious Labour Market Positions”, is the alarming title of Ali Osman’s and Per Andersson’s chapter. The authors examine a pilot intervention measure to facilitate the integration of immigrants. The aim of the measure is to shorten the process of integrating immigrants with a technical and vocational profession in their area of competence or profession in the Swedish labour market. These types of measures in Sweden are commonly known as “validation programmes”.

In a collection of chapters on Swedish working life, there is a need for a perspective from outside the Swedish borders. In the last chapter of this book, “How Dark are the Clouds over Sweden?” Professor Steve Jefferys, from London Metropolitan University, reflects on our texts. Jefferys touches on three themes; social equality, ideology and social class. He compares developments in Sweden with developments in other OECD countries, asking if social equality still prevailed in the mid-2000s.

References


