

Do Swedes Still Need the Union? Attitudes to Collective and Individual Negotiations with the Employer in 1997 and 2006

Mattias Bengtsson and Tomas Berglund
Department of Sociology, University of Gothenburg, Box 720,
405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

INTRODUCTION

This paper contributes to analyses of de-collectivisation in working life. It is said that processes of individualisation challenge class-based organisations — that class as a determinant of identity, membership, conflict and attitudes is replaced by social structures that are more open for individual choices (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). It is said that employees are encouraged, or even forced, to take more risks and initiatives — that they acquire entrepreneurial qualities as a result of greater influence over how work is planned and performed (du Gay 1996; Pongratz and Voß 2003). Besides individualisation of working conditions, it is said that collectivist attitudes are replaced by individualistic leanings. If collective solutions are becoming less important, class-based attitudinal differences may level out, and individualistic attitudes may mount, in particular among the young, which are expected to be at the forefront of this process. Union representation may become of less concern, while the readiness to negotiate individually with the employer may increase. Whether employees are less attracted by collective solutions is not least interesting to study in a Swedish perspective, since the basic conflict between capital and labour has been strongly canalised in collective forms. In this paper, employees' attitudes to two ways of negotiating with the employer are studied, based on Swedish survey data from 1997 and 2006.

BACKGROUND

Sweden is characterised by institutionalised collective systems of bargaining, a high coverage of collective agreements, covering public systems of social welfare and employment security, as well as a very high union density (Kjellberg 1998; Pontusson 2005; Thörnqvist 2007). However, there are signs of declining union demand. The union density has fallen persistently from the very high union density in the middle of the 1990s (85 percent). As the current right/centre-wing coalition government took office in 2006, the drop was extraordinary — during 2007 union density fell from 77 percent to 73 percent. It was partly a consequence of a flourishing economy, but mostly due to that the level of employees' own contributions to the unemployment benefit fund was steeply raised, following new government policies. More employees were forced to weigh the costs of their contributions to the unemployment benefit fund against the cost of union membership (Kjellberg 2008).

Another sign of de-collectivisation is decentralisation of wage bargaining. Until the 1980s, Sweden was well known for its highly centralised system of bargaining that had benefited an egalitarian wage-distribution, through the so-called 'solidaristic wage policy' (Meidner and Öhman 1972; Silverman 1998). In the early 1980s, there was a retreat from peak-level bargaining, and national agreements are by and large less detailed today, although national agreements still play a major role. As Kjellberg (1998: 94) says, unless the wage policies of unions are substantially transformed, a 'completely decentralized pay determination seems unrealistic'. However, the changes over the last three decades could be described as a gradual move towards more decentralised labour market systems. More room for firm-level bargaining has

made it possible to individualise wage determination for a higher proportion of the Swedish employees, and the principles of market-adaptation and individualisation have generally been accepted by the unions (Kjellberg 1998; Pontusson 2005; Thörnqvist 1999).

Against the backdrop of declining union density and individualisation of wage agreements, we will study employees' attitudes towards two ways of negotiating with the employer — whether the unions are needed in negotiations with the employer or whether the individual prefer to handle the negotiations with the employer him- or herself. According to Deery and Walsh (1999: 250), a collectivistic work orientation is defined as 'a belief that the most appropriate way of addressing industrial issues and achieving improvements in the terms and conditions of work is through a union and by collective effort'. Following this, an individualistic work orientation could be regarded as a belief in one's own capacities to improve terms and conditions of work. If this orientation grows among employees, it may become more legitimate to use unilateral channels for individual problem solving.

A theme in the literature on de-collectivisation and individualisation is the dissolution of class. Some, as Pakulski (2005), envisage a transformation from the organised capitalism of modern industrial societies, with class interests articulated in parties, movements and ideologies to the disorganised capitalism of postmodern, postindustrial societies. It is said that social classes dissolve and that corporatism collapses as a result of globalisation and individualisation and the spread of individualism. However, seeing union membership as a form of class consciousness, a multivariate regression analysis of Swedish survey data from 2003 shows that the odds for being non-unionised was more than three times higher in the service class than in the working class (Bengtsson 2008: 131). The statements that we analyse in this paper have earlier been analysed by Furåker and Berglund (2003), as well as by Bengtsson (2008). Both studies found class-based attitudes to negotiations with the employer. The perceived need for the union was stronger in the working class, while the view that one prefers to take care of negotiations individually is strongly endorsed in the service class and in the intermediate class.

Besides class, discussions of de-collectivisation are associated with age. If contemporary societies are becoming less collectivistic and more individualised, the young are expected to be at the forefront of this process. One possible sign of such a process is union membership decline. In Sweden, union decline is specifically noticeable among the young — the union density among employees 16-24 years fell from 69 to 40 percent between 1993 and 2007. During the same time period, union density decreased from 89 to 82 percent among employees 45-64 years (Kjellberg forthcoming). The aforementioned study from 2003 shows that the odds for being non-unionised were more than seven times higher among the young than the old. However, the hypothesis that the young are more individualistically oriented than the old were not supported — the young did neither agree less with the statement that the union is needed, nor did they agree more with the statement that it is best to handle negotiations with the employer by herself/himself (Bengtsson 2008: chapter 6).

DATA AND METHOD

We analyse data from two surveys carried out in 1997 and 2006. The 1997 data were collected within the framework of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). A postal survey was distributed to a random sample of individuals, and our analysis is limited to 974 employees aged 18-64. The 2006 data were collected by Statistics Sweden. A postal survey was distributed to a random sample aged 16-64, and 1851 individuals responded. We study whether employees' agree or disagree with the

following statements: 'The union is needed for employees to be successful in negotiations with their employer' and 'My interests are best looked after if I handle negotiations with my employer myself'. The response alternatives are 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', or 'strongly disagree'. The variables are dichotomised – 'strongly agree' and 'agree' have been collapsed into the category 'those who agree' while 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree' have been collapsed into 'those who do not agree'.

If the employee is positive to the union, he or she will probably agree with the statement that trade unions are necessary for successful negotiations with the employer, while a negative attitude ought to result in the opinion that one prefer to take care of negotiations with the employer oneself. Therefore, it is likely that the statements are located on a collectivistic-individualistic axis. However, the statements do not fully oppose each other: 'The former assertion invites the respondent to make a general evaluation of the need for collective action through the union, whereas the latter asks for a judgement of the individual's capacity in negotiating with the employer' (Furåker and Berglund 2003: 575). Besides being able to study attitudinal changes, we pay particular attention to whether or not collectivistic and individualistic attitudes are affected by class position, union membership and age. We will also comment upon the effects of union activity, gender, working time, type of contract, sector of employment and size of workplace. We carry out multivariate analyses to examine whether, or to what extent, these factors impact upon employees' attitudes. The statistical method is binary logistic regression, where the dependent variables have been dichotomised ('those who agree'/'those who do not agree'). For each of the independent variables, a reference category has been defined, and the other values of the variable are compared with it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In table 1, the proportion in 1997 and 2006 that agree or do not agree with the two statements is presented. In 1997, 64 percent agreed that the union is needed; a decade later, a lower proportion (61 percent) agreed with the statement. Simultaneously, the proportion being positive to handle negotiations with the employer on their own was higher in 2006 (37 percent) than in 1997 (33 percent). The attitudinal differences between 1997 and 2006 are statistically significant. Concluding, the majority still support the belief that the union is needed for successful negotiations with the employer, but the proportion is somewhat lower in 2006.

Table 1 Attitudes towards two ways of negotiating with the employer, in 1997 and 2006 (%)

	1997			2006		
	Agree	Do Not Agree	Total and Number	Agree	Do Not Agree	Total and Number
'The union is needed for employees to be successful in negotiations with their employer'	63.8	36.2	100 (738)	60.6	39.4	100 (1759)
'My interests are best looked after if I take care of negotiations with my employer myself'	33.3	66.7	100 (705)	36.7	63.3	100 (1621)

As seen in table 2, class position influence employees' preferences of collective negotiations. The working class is the most assertive, both in 1997 and 2006. Though, the odds ratios between the classes are larger in 1997 than 2006, which

indicate lesser class differences in 2006. In theories of individualisation, the young are often seen as forerunners in adopting new opinions. They are supposed to be more individualistically oriented than the old, and, thereby, showing less interest in the unions. However, employees 18-29 years are not less inclined to agree with the statement that the union is needed than older employees, neither in 1997 nor in 2006. Instead, employees 30-39 years are less willing to agree with the statement in 2006, in comparison with both younger and older employees. We can also notice that employees 40-49 years are most supportive of the statement in 1997.

Table 2 Effects on odds for agreeing that the union is needed in 1997 and 2006. Logistic Regression

	Model A		Model B	
	1997	2006	1997	2006
Class	***	***	Not included	Not included
<i>Service class</i>	0.38***	0.63***		
<i>Intermediate class</i>	0.60*	0.68**		
<i>Working class (ref.)</i>	1	1		
Union membership	Not included	Not included	***	***
<i>Non-unionised</i>			0.28***	0.24***
<i>Other union</i>			0.77	0.43*
<i>Saco</i>			0.41**	0.57**
<i>TCO</i>			0.79	0.72*
<i>LO (ref.)</i>			1	1
Active in union	Not included	Not included	***	***
<i>Yes</i>			2.51***	2.60***
<i>No (ref.)</i>			1	1
Age	+	***	*	**
<i>18-29</i>	1.03	0.94	1.41	1.25
<i>30-39</i>	0.82	0.57***	0.85	0.68**
<i>40-49</i>	1.57*	0.87	1.59*	0.90
<i>50-64 (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Gender				+
<i>Male</i>	1.02	1.12	1.09	1.23+
<i>Female (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Working time				
<i>Part-time</i>	1.12	0.91	1.22	1.05
<i>Full-time (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Type of contract				**
<i>Temporary</i>	1.35	1.36	1.32	1.92**
<i>Permanent (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Sector of employment		**		
<i>Public</i>	1.31	1.40**	1.19	1.16
<i>Private (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Size of workplace				
<i>0-9</i>	0.74	0.92	1.11	1.13
<i>10-49</i>	0.98	0.92	1.23	0.94
<i>50-99</i>	0.91	1.00	1.04	0.98
<i>100-499</i>	0.77	1.01	0.77	0.95
<i>500 or more (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Constant	2.54**	2.11***	1.45	1.67*
n	592	1720	602	1683

Levels of significance: +=p<0.10; *=p<0.05; **=p<0.01; ***=p<0.001

In model B, we control for union membership and union activity. Sweden has a strongly class-based union movement (class position is excluded in model B because of its high correlation with union membership), through the division of blue-collar workers, white-collar workers and academics in three peak-level organisations. LO (Landsorganisationen) is the main working-class organisation, TCO

(Tjänstemännens centralorganisation) mainly recruits members among lower-level and middle-level white collars, and Saco (Sveriges akademikers centralorganisation) is the main organisation for professionals. Saco members are less assertive that the union is needed than LO members (which is also the case for TCO members in 2006). The non-unionised are expected to take rather little interests in unions, and this is verified by the results – the odds for agreeing that the union is needed is approximately four times lower among non-unionised than among union members. Furthermore, those who have been participating in union activities support the statement to a higher degree than passive members.

In 2006, public sector employees agreed more with the statement than private sector employees. However, when union membership is controlled for, the difference is no longer statistically significant. Concluding, the sector differences are mainly explained by union membership. As unionisation is higher in the public sector than in the private (our sample shows that 8 percent are non-unionised in the public sector and 23 percent in the private), a higher degree of public sector employees also agree with the statement that the union is needed in negotiations with the employer.

In table 3, we can see evident class differences regarding the statement that it is best to handle negotiations with the employer by oneself – the odds are higher for the service class and the intermediate class than for the working class. We also make the same interpretation as regards the statement on whether the union is needed – the results in table 3 indicate that the class differences have decreased somewhat between 1997 and 2006. There are also clear differences between members from the peak-level organisations, with Saco members as the most individualistically oriented. Non-unionised had an eightfold higher risk of agreeing with the statement than a LO member in 1997. The differences between non-unionised and LO members have decreased from 1997 to 2006, while the differences have somewhat increased between LO members and Saco and TCO members. We can also notice that other union members are also more positive to individual negotiations than LO members in 2006. Finally, active union members prefer to a lesser degree to handle negotiations individually than passive members, logically following that the former group is more committed to the union.

If the young are not less inclined to agree with that the union is needed, are they more supportive of the statement that it is best to negotiate individually with the employer? In 1997, employees 18-29 years were clearly the most supportive of the four age groups. However, when we control for union membership, the age effects are no longer statistically significant. Following this, a higher proportion of the young is non-unionised, and that make them more assertive to negotiate individually. In 2006, we can see that employees 30-39 years were most keen on an individual solution, while there are no differences between employees 18-29 years and 40-64 years. The effects are reduced when we control for union membership, but the odds are still statistically significant. There are no straightforward explanations for the results, but they may indicate a generational effect. In the years that passed from 1997 to 2006, the generation of employees 18-29 years were mainly found in the next age interval of employees. However, it is not that obvious why people in the generation born between 1968 and 1979 should be less supportive of the union than other generations. One possible explanation is that this is a generation that had its adolescence during an era of Thatcherism, Reaganism and Neoliberalism, i.e. during a *zeitgeist* of strong individualism, when welfare state institutions and corporative industrial relations were very much seen as an impediment for the maximisation of self-interest (cf. Kessler and Purcell 1995; Phelps Brown 1990).

Finally, a few words on the other results. There are no gender differences, and the odds ratios for working time or type of contract are not statistically significant when class is controlled for. Though, when we control for union membership we can see that employees in part-time work (employees that work less than 35 hours per week) are less inclined to individual negotiations, both in 1997 and 2006, and this is also the case for employees with temporary contracts in 2006. The results also show attitudinal differences regarding sector of employment and size of workplace. Private sector employees are particularly apt to handle negotiations with the employer individually, and this is also the case for employees at smaller workplaces.

Table 3 Effects on odds for agreeing that it is best to handle negotiations with the employer oneself in 1997 and 2006; Logistic Regression

	Model A		Model B	
	1997	2006	1997	2006
Class	***	***	Not included	Not included
<i>Service class</i>	3.61***	2.55***		
<i>Intermediate class</i>	2.59***	1.67**		
<i>Working class (ref.)</i>	1	1		
Union membership	Not included	Not included	***	***
<i>Non-unionised</i>			8.20***	5.62***
<i>Other union</i>			1.59	3.91***
<i>Saco</i>			2.93***	3.29***
<i>TCO</i>			1.74*	1.95***
<i>LO (ref.)</i>			1	1
Active in union	Not included	Not included	*	***
<i>Yes</i>			0.58*	0.47***
<i>No (ref.)</i>			1	1
Age	+	**		
<i>18-29</i>	1.83*	1.22	1.27	0.92
<i>30-39</i>	1.08	1.56**	0.97	1.32+
<i>40-49</i>	0.93	1.03	0.91	0.98
<i>50-64 (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Gender				
<i>Male</i>	1.00	1.09	0.86	1.05
<i>Female (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Working time			+	+
<i>Part-time</i>	0.75	0.87	0.64+	0.77+
<i>Full-time (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Type of contract				*
<i>Temporary</i>	1.03	0.87	1.03	0.64*
<i>Permanent (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Sector of employment	**	***	**	**
<i>Public</i>	0.52**	0.56***	0.51**	0.70**
<i>Private (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Size of workplace	**	***		**
<i>0-9</i>	2.57**	2.43***	1.77+	1.96**
<i>10-49</i>	2.03*	2.02***	1.62	2.05***
<i>50-99</i>	1.26	1.66*	1.12	1.77*
<i>100-499</i>	1.11	1.28	1.17	1.40
<i>500 or more (ref.)</i>	1	1	1	1
Constant	0.17***	0.21***	0.31**	0.23***
n	570	1585	580	1550

Levels of significance: +=p<0.10; *=p<0.05; **=p<0.01; ***=p<0.001

CONCLUSIONS

A comparison of Swedish survey data from 1997 and 2006 show that there is a minor decrease in the importance employees' ascribe to the unions, as well as a minor

increase in employees' willingness to negotiate individually. However, the perceived need for the union was still high in 2006 — six out of ten agreed that unions are needed for successful negotiations with their employers. That Swedish employees still feel that the unions are a relevant social force is also seen in European survey data from 2002/3, where 76 percent feel the need for strong unions to protect their working conditions and wages (D'Art and Turner 2008: 178), as well as in Swedish survey data from 2003, where 67 percent 'totally' or 'partly' agree that the union is needed for them to be successful in negotiations with the employer (Bengtsson 2008: 137).

Employees' views of their preferred relations to unions and employers are clearly class-based. The perceived need for the union is more widespread in the working class, while the view that one prefers to take care of negotiations individually is strongly endorsed by the service class. The effects of class is also seen when we control for union membership. There are clear differences between the members of the peak-level organisations. Members of the main organisation for professionals, Saco, are the most individualistically oriented, while members of the main working-class organization, LO, have a stronger collectivistic workorientation. Classrelations clearly have an impact on collectivistic and individualistic attitudes among Swedish employees. However, it is also interesting to note that the effect of class is somewhat smaller in 2006 than in 1997. Is this a sign of that class-based attitudes are beginning to somewhat level out?

Another way to study attitudinal changes is to have a look at the attitudes of the young. Interestingly enough, employees 18-29 years are neither in 1997 nor in 2006 less inclined to agree with that the union is needed. The results are supported by the aforementioned European survey data — employees below 25 years of age are actually more positive to the statement that strong trade unions are needed to protect their working conditions and wages (D'Art and Turner 2008). The result that lends some support to the thesis of the young as more individualistically oriented is that employees 18-29 years were the most supportive of individual negotiations in 1997. However, a much lower union density among the young than among the old seems to mainly explain the age effect. When looking at 2006, there are no attitudinal differences between the young and the old. Instead, employees 30-39 years are the most supportive of the statement. We have posed the question whether this could be interpreted as a generational effect, i.e. that people born between 1968 and 1979 are more individualistically oriented than other generations, as a result of that they had their adolescence during a *zeitgeist* of strong individualism. In summary, the results show weak support for that collectivist attitudes have been replaced by individualistic leanings — not at all corresponding to descriptions of the young as forerunners in adopting individualistic orientations.

REFERENCES

Beck, U. and Beck-Gemshem, E. (2002) *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. London: Sage.

Bengtsson, M. (2008) *Individen stämplar in: Arbetet, facket och lönen i sociologisk belysning* [The individual is clocking in: A sociological illumination of work, the trade union and pay]. Göteborg: Department of Sociology, University of Gothenburg.

D'Art, D. and Turner, T. (2008) 'Workers and the Demand for Trade Unions in Europe: Still a Relevant Social Force?', *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 29(2): 165-91.

- Deery, S. and Walsh, J. (1999) 'The Decline of Collectivism? A Comparative Study of White-Collar Employees in Britain and Australia', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 37(2), 245-69.
- du Gay, P. (1996) 'Organizing Identity: Entrepreneurial Governance and Public Management'. In Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, pp. 151-69. London: Sage.
- Furåker, B. and Berglund, T. (2003) 'Are the Unions Still Needed? Employees' Views of their Relations to Unions and Employers', *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 24 (4): 573-94.
- Kessler, I. and Purcell, J. (1995) 'Individualism and Collectivism in Theory and Practice: Management Style and the Design of Pay Systems', pp. 337-67 in Paul Edwards (ed.) *Industrial Relations. Theory and Practice in Britain*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kjellberg, A. (1998) 'Sweden: Restoring the Model?'. In Anthony Ferner and Richard Hyman (eds), *Changing Industrial Relations in Europe*, pp. 74-117. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kjellberg, A. (2008) *Det fackliga medlemsraslet i Sverige under 2007*. Working paper, 2 June 2008. Lunds universitet: Sociologiska institutionen.
- Kjellberg, A. (forthcoming) 'Fackliga organisationer och *industrial relations*', 28 January 2009. In Stefan Schedin and Tomas Berglund (eds), *Arbetslivet*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Meidner, R. and Öhman, B. (1972) *Solidarisk lönepolitik: Erfarenheter, problem, framtidsutsikter*. Stockholm: Tidens förlag.
- Pakulski, J. (2005) 'Foundations of a post-class analysis'. In Erik Olin Wright (ed.) *Approaches to Class Analysis*, pp. 152-79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phelps Brown, H. (1990) 'The Counter-Revolution of Our Time', *Industrial Relations* 29(1): 1-14.
- Pongratz, H.J. and Voß, G.G. (2003) 'From employee to 'entreplooyee'', *Concepts and Transformation* 8(3): 239-54.
- Pontusson, J. (2005) *Inequality and Prosperity. Social Europe vs. Liberal America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Silverman, B. (1998) 'The Rise and Fall of the Swedish Model. Interview with Rudolf Meidner', *Challenge* 41(1): 69-90.
- Thörnqvist, C. (1999) 'The Decentralisation of Industrial Relations: The Swedish Case in Comparative Perspective', *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 5(1): 71-87.
- Thörnqvist, C. (2007) 'Changing industrial relations in the Swedish public sector. New tensions within the old framework of corporatism', *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 20(1): 16-33.