

Sweden's regional health and safety representatives - now also for salaried and professional employees in small firms

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Abstract: This paper is a short description of the Swedish system of regional safety representatives and how it starts to be broadened also to all kinds of white collar employees in small firms. It is thus an input to the discussion on the effectiveness of worker representation in OHS at the ODAM workshop on this, and does not aim to present results from a research project.

1. The 1974 system of external safety reps for small firms appointed by regional unions

The background is that worker representation is repeatedly found to be essential for an effective occupational health and safety management (OHSM; see an overview in Walters & Nichols, 2007). Yet such a representation is difficult and limited in small firms (Walters, 2001). Since 1974, Sweden therefore has a system of external regional safety representatives (RSR), appointed by the unions to support workers and OHSM in small firms (see Frick, 2009, on the background, structure, function and challenges of Sweden's RSR-system; and AV, 2014a, on funding, numbers and other facts and of union reports on the RSR's activities for 2013).

Similar systems of external representation to support small firms exist in some other countries (e.g. Italy, Norway and Spain) but the Swedish one is by far the largest. Sweden's RSRs cover (nearly) all small firms – even those that have local safety reps, which the RSRs are to support – without joint OHS committees (mandatory from 50 employees, but often lacking also in larger firms) and where the union has at least one member (which they mostly have, at least from five employees). However, a fairly large number of micro-firm, with 1-4 employees of which none is a union members are not covered by the RSR-system. The RSRs' activities are in principle reimbursed by government funding to the unions. This is based on a policy that safety reps are essential for health at work and that their activity therefore should be a cost of doing business. But it is deemed too difficult – and counter-productive to the intended cooperation – to charge small firms for every RSR-visit. Hence the government funding for the RSRs, since long of some 100 M SEK.

LO (the Swedish Trade Union Confederation), with the blue collar unions, is still the largest federation but it unions have shrunk with changes in the economy and its job structure. However, they still dominate among the RSRs. In 2013, they had appointed RSRs for practically all of 'their' 420 000 workplaces, with in all close to 700 000 members. The LO-unions' 1 139 RSRs (mostly on part-time, or 248 as full-time equivalents) visited more than 53 000 small workplaces (while labour inspectors visited some 19 000 workplaces, of which very many were parts of larger employers; AV, 2014b). To enable this, the LO-unions topped the government funding (of some 76 M SEK) by paying more half of the RSR-costs themselves. Over the years, LO's RSRs have managed to achieve very many OHS improvements but still maintain a mostly a good cooperation with the owners-

managers (Frick & Walters, 1998; Gellerstedt, 2007). However, the shift towards a supply-chain economy has created more, and often more vulnerable, small firms while a severe cut in the labour inspection since 2007 has drastically reduced their supervision of small firms. This calls for more RSR-support to small firms' OHSM, but economic and political changes are instead eroding the basis of the RSR-system (Frick, 2009).

2. Regional safety reps now support more professional employees in small firms

During the 1980s and 90s, the unions within the general white-collar federation TCO (the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees) started to appoint RSRs for their members in firms without joint OHS committees. In 2013, they had 531 RSRs (37 full-time equivalents; with 18 M SEK in government funding), who visited some 5 700 of, and had around 11 300 phone or mail contacts with, 'their' 77 000 workplaces. The mentioned shift in the economy and the job structure has resulted in that more white collar employees work in small firms, and that they experience more psychosocial risks at work, notably of work overload, but also problems of bullying and sometimes of threats and violence (AV, 2012; Unionen, 2012). The union activity is mostly low in the dispersed firms, with some members but no local union club and no local safety rep, and hence only a limited legally mandated dialogue with the management.

The smaller, but growing professional unions in the SACO-federation (the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations, i.e. employees with academic degrees) have recently expanded their (still limited) coverage of regional safety reps to support their members. SACO's teachers union and its union for church employees have each had a few RSRs for many years, but now most other SACO-unions with members in small firms have started with such reps (albeit on a small scale, as SACO in all gets 5 M SEK in government funding for this). The unions that have started with RSRs are on the one hand those for professionals in the more and more privatized well-fare services, such as for physicians working in small health centers or social workers in privately run youth homes. On the other, the four unions for engineers, for lawyers, for economists and for scientists have jointly appointed some RSRs to support their members, who increasingly work in small firms. The latter four unions have more than 25 000 small firms, with 76 000 members in the three regions in which they have started with RSRs. In 2013 the RSRs of all the SACO-unions visited some 1 250 workplaces but some fourth of their time was used for phone or mail advice to small firms and their members in these. LO's, TCO's and SACOs' RSR all also use much of their time for OHS training, much for local safety reps in small firms (AV, 2014a).

The white-collar RSRs have a slightly different role than their blue-collar colleagues. With less focus on technical risks – for which they sometimes ask LO's regional or local safety reps for advice – they are often called in to help on individual psychosocial problems. In many cases, the RSRs are called in too late, when the conflict or stress situation cannot be resolved. The RSR can then only try to help the affected member to move to a new job (Sjöholm, 2010). And psychosocial risk prevention is much less supported by provisions that define the problems and what employers must do to prevent them (Frick, 2010) White collar unions have therefore long pushed for specified provisions on the psychosocial work environment (Union, 2012), which so far have been difficult to achieve (Bruhn & Frick, 2011).

Their weaker preventive role is also due to less resources for the white-collar and professional RSRs than LO's blue-collar ones. This results in much fewer workplace visits and more contacts by phone and mail, which also is a reason for (the mentioned) sometimes late interventions to support members with individual - or individualized – problems.

However, the few – but now slightly more – RSRs from the TCO- and SACO-unions also try to improve local prevention. According to TCO's report on their RSRs' activities in 2012, these were mainly: "*OHS training, including on regulations, of local safety reps and other members; support to small firms' mandatory systematic work environment management*" [Sweden's mandatory OHS; an extended version of EU's Framework Directive]; *concrete help with risk identification, assessment and solution; and worker compensation cases, including individual rehabilitation plans. The RSRs find that their activity results in the election of more local safety reps and more OHS competence among these reps and the employers*" (AV, 2013, p. 36). For 2013, TCO reported that their unions' RSR keep focusing on support to the local OHS management (according to the Swedish provisions on Systematic Work Environment Management, SWEM, that transposes EU's Framework directive 89/391/EC) but the RSRs also had to try to resolve many risks of mainly stress and other work overload, of threats and violence and of physical problems in e.g. office landscapes (AV, 2014, p. 47-48).

For 2012, SACO reports much work (within the four new unions concerned) to set up the RSR-system and to spread information to the covered workplaces and members of the possibility of (a limited) support from the RSRs. However, SACO also writes that: "*What the RSRs contributes depends very much on the workplaces' own work environment activity. The focus of the mission is of course to achieve an effective local systematic work environment management. One problem, though, is that many workplaces have no work environment activity at all. RSRs helps to develop the structure for both a work environment management and for [local] cooperation [within this]*" (AV, 2013, p. 48-49). And for 2013, SACO's regional reps, the 'new' unions' four RSR (only 0.7 as full-time equivalent) were to cover some 30 000 workplaces, of which they could visit some 186. These RSRs too focused much on improving local SWEM, including to get local safety reps appointed wherever that was possible. The RSRs found that their workplace contacts were very positively received, including by the employer-managers (AV, 2014a, p. 68).

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