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Greening transport in Sweden: the role of the organic intellectual in changing union climate change policy

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ABSTRACT

This article engages with the role of the individual in transforming union organizations by discussing the experiences of Ulf Jarnefjord and his efforts to introduce climate change policies into the Swedish Transport Workers’ Union [Transportarbetareförbundet]. Research investigating the integration of climate change policies into the agenda of Swedish trade unions has identified a disconnect between policy development among leaders on the one hand, and engagement among members on the other. Employing the life-history interview method, and the analytical concept of ‘organic intellectual’, this article focusses on the ways in which Ulf, as a regional health and safety officer, has experienced engaging with climate change issues in relation to both members and the leadership of his union. His experiences point to the importance of learning about how climate change and production impact on the everyday lives of members for developing and mobilizing support for climate change policies in unions.

KEYWORDS

Trade unions; Sweden; climate change; life history interview; organic intellectuals; technological fix

Aim and background

In this article, I discuss the experiences of Ulf Jarnefjord and his efforts to introduce climate change policies into the Swedish Transport Workers’ Union [Transportarbetareförbundet (abbreviated ‘Transport’)], from his position working as a regional health and safety officer at the union’s Gothenburg branch. I direct attention on the one hand to the challenges Ulf has faced in these efforts, and on the other to the moments at which such challenges have been successfully overcome. On a more general level, the analysis engages with the role of the individual in changing union organizations, and the conditions for integrating climate change into the agenda of trade unions. The analysis is informed by previous observations (Lundström, 2017; Lundström, Räthzel, & Uzzell, 2015) that there is a lack of dialogue between climate policy development among union officials and leaders at headquarters on the one hand, and the climate interests of members on the other, in Sweden. Therefore, the analysis directs a particular focus to Ulf’s experiences from engaging union members into the development of climate change policies.

Before outlining in further detail the framework guiding my analysis of Ulf’s experiences, I will first provide some contextual background about Transport and Swedish labour market relations. Transport was created in Stockholm in 1897, and is a part of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation [Landsorganisationen i Sverige (LO)], organizing blue-collar unions in Sweden. Transport’s headquarters are located opposite the LO-headquarters, the so-called LO-castle, at Stockholm’s...
Norra Bantorget square. The organization today consists of 27 local branch chapters, and organizes about 61,000 workers in a range of sectors, such as; road transport workers, airport personnel, surveillance and security personnel, dockyard workers, newspaper and advertisement distribution workers, and tire shops and gas station workers. Internationally, Transport is a member of the Nordic Transport Workers Federation (NTF), the European Transport Workers Federation (ETF), as well as the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF).

For most parts of the twentieth century, union density levels in Sweden have been extremely high by international comparison, and the majority of workers in Sweden, i.e. LO-members, have also been unified in their support for the social democratic party. The development of the so-called Swedish model has therefore been seen as conditioned largely by the power resources of the workers’ movement. The Swedish model is characterized by a generous welfare state, the institutionalization of centralized and collective negotiations between employers and unions, and a focus on consensus rather than conflict (Thullberg & Östberg, 1994). A defining feature of the ‘historical compromise’ (Korpi, 1983) governing the Swedish model of consensus is that employers agree to negotiate collective agreements with unions, and unions accept employers’ rights to manage work, ostensibly in order to promote labour market productivity and growth. From a more critical perspective, labour relations in Sweden have been described as neo-corporatist, or state corporatist, and as maintaining order on an employer-dominated labour market (Lewin, 1994), rather than serving the interests of workers. Swedish unions have also been described as democratically weak as they are highly centralized and characterized by a monolithic organizational structure.

Over the last couple of decades, it has been argued that trade unions are ‘fading away’ (Castells, 2000) and that the labour movement is in a state of crisis (Silver, 2003). Integrating climate change into the agenda of unions has accordingly often been linked to arguments for trade union revitalization (Fairbrother, 2015; Frege & Kelly, 2003; Murray, 2017). The political strength of the labour movement has been undermined in Sweden too, following increased mobilization of employers (Ryner, 1999) and increased public support for right-wing parties. Neoliberal privatization has also weakened the de-commodifying institutions, and in particular the unemployment insurance programme, of the Swedish welfare state (see Lundström, 2011). In developments similar to many other Western economies – related to a declining industrial sector, in which union mobilization traditionally has been strong (Munck, 2002), and increasing labour market fragmentation and deregulation (Gray, 2004) – Swedish unions have also experienced declining support. However, union membership levels have not decreased as much in Sweden as in many other countries. From peaking at about 85% in the mid-1980s, they have dropped but remained on average at about 70% during the last decade (Kjellberg, 2011; LO, 2016).

**Analytical framework and method**

As visions of a ‘green economy’ are currently emerging in our society on a more general level, they are commonly produced through negotiations between discourses of ‘ecological modernization’. On the one hand, ‘weak’ discourses of ecological modernization focus on the capacities of established institutions and growth-centred economic systems to adapt to environmental imperatives, while the ‘strong’ ones call for more radical political interventions in order to mitigate climate change. Such visions have been criticized for imposing a consensus-oriented post-political logic on sustainability governance (Bailey & Caprotti, 2014) and for obscuring the need for engaging critically with the impact of capitalism on climate change. Researchers investigating how climate agendas are developing in trade unions have, along similar lines, shown that unions also tend to draw on discourses of
ecological modernization: They commonly do not challenge capitalism and the processes causing climate change, and they often rely heavily on ‘technological fix’ arguments (see, for example, Felli, 2014; Hrynyshyn & Ross, 2011; Nugent, 2011; Snell & Fairbrother, 2010, 2011). This has been observed also in the Swedish union context (Lundström, 2017).

The challenges unions face when engaging with climate change have been described in terms of the ‘jobs vs. environment’ dilemma (Räthzel & Uzzell, 2011), illustrating that they are caught in conflicts between protecting jobs on the one hand, and protecting the environment on the other. As argued by Foster (1999) capitalism does not acknowledge the interdependent relationship between work and nature, and thus allows for production to use natural resources without restoring them, creating a ‘metabolic rift’. The fact that there are challenges to working with climate change in trade unions thus follows from unions being embedded in a capitalist mode of production marked by the metabolic rift (Lundström et al., 2015). Based on these observations, it follows that it is important to analyse under what circumstances it is possible to challenge discourses of ecological modernization – and particularly in its weaker forms – while introducing climate change policies into trade unions, and when it becomes possible for unions to engage in discussions that acknowledge the interdependent relationship between work and nature, and the impact of the current mode of production on the climate.

As traditions and routines for engaging with environmental perspectives commonly are under-developed in the trade union movement, it has been shown that the development of green union agendas commonly depends on the commitment of engaged individuals (Räthzel & Uzzell, 2013, 2011). Researchers investigating the formation of ‘blue-green’ alliances between the environmental movement and the labour movement (Mayer, 2009; Obach, 2002; Rose, 2003; Van Alstyne, 2015) have also pointed to the significance of individual actors for such processes. In particular, they have observed that certain individuals, with connections and high degrees of legitimacy across both movements, can act as ‘bridge-brokers’ (Obach, 2004) between the two. As cross-movement interaction between environmentalists and unionists is not that common – something which I will return to later in relation to Ulf’s experiences from the Swedish context – the role of individuals for establishing connections by which new ideas and perspectives can be introduced into organizations is often of crucial importance. Consequently, there is a lot to learn from individuals who are actually engaged with introducing environmental perspectives into trade unions. The analysis presented here employs Gramsci’s concept of ‘organic intellectual’ (1999) in order to elaborate on the role of the individual in changing organizations. To Gramsci, an organic intellectual is someone who ‘actively takes part in practical life, as a constructor, organizer, “permanent persuader”, and not just a simple orator’ (1999, pp. 141–142), and who is therefore able to challenge the established consensus of a class or group, by rearticulating the experiences of that group.

The analysis presented in this article was conducted in the context of a research project investigating the role of individuals in changing organizations. Based on the arguments outlined above, the project more specifically investigated the case of trade union officials working with environmental issues.¹ The project conducted 121 biographical interviews with unionists in Sweden, India, South Africa, the UK, Brazil, and Spain. As the project was interested in analysing how the individual backgrounds of respondents relate to their engagement with the labour movement and climate change, as well as the organizational and societal contexts in which they developed, the interviews were conducted as life-history interviews (Portelli, 1997). In the interviews, respondents were asked to tell their life histories, with particular attention to the ways in which they came to engage with trade unions and climate change.
In Sweden, the project interviewed a majority of all union officials working with environmental issues. In relation to the other Swedish respondents, it became clear that Ulf’s experiences were of particular interest to analyse in further detail. First of all, he is one of very few unionists interviewed by the project in the Swedish context who described experiences of discussing climate change with members of his union. As it has previously been observed that the efforts of Swedish union officials working at headquarters with policy development commonly were not engaged in dialogue with members (Lundström et al., 2015) – and as it has also been suggested that engaging in dialogue with members is of particular importance for integrating climate change into the trade union agenda (Lundström, 2017) – Ulf’s experiences are, in this regard, of significant importance. Secondly, Ulf stood out in the material as one of very few unionists interviewed in Sweden with experience from establishing relationships between his union and organizations in other sectors of the civil society, making also his experiences as a ‘bridge-broker’ in the Swedish context of additional interest.

My conversation with Ulf took place at his office at Transport’s Gothenburg branch headquarters. The conversation was taped and transcribed, and during the subsequent analysis of the interview, I also had additional conversations with Ulf over the phone and by email. The analysis of our conversations was guided by an overarching focus on the ways in which Ulf described his role in working with climate change in his union. Employing the concept of ‘turning points’ (Kohler Riessman, 2012), the analysis also paid attention to the specific moments and events in life that Ulf experienced as particularly important for this work. The analysis was furthermore guided by two sets of specific research questions. The first relates to the ways in which Ulf describes challenges to his work and the consequences of these challenges: What specific challenges to introducing climate change into the trade union movement does Ulf identify as significant? How have such challenges impacted on his efforts to introduce climate change? The second set of questions relates to the conditions under which challenges have been successfully overcome: Under what conditions has Ulf been able to introduce the issue of climate change into his union? What kinds of conditions and strategies does Ulf consider important for introducing climate change issues into the union?

Challenges, resistance, and strategies

Born in the mid-1950s, Ulf grew up in the Gothenburg suburb Kviiberg. Today, he remembers the time he spent in the boy scouts during childhood as important for fostering an environmental awareness and a respect for nature that has remained with him until today. Ulf’s union engagement is also something that has been a part of his life since early on. During secondary education, Ulf started to work in the – at the time internationally very successful – shipyard industry in Gothenburg, where he was elected as the youngest ever union representative for the locally strong metal workers union. During his military service, he continued his union engagement by becoming one of the first safety representatives for conscripts. After military service, at the age of 20, Ulf travelled by himself as a backpacker to the US and the West Indies because he wanted to see the world. This inspired him to start working as a travel guide, primarily in Southern Europe and Northern Africa, during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Seeing the huge differences in living standards in these countries, and the ways in which poor people were exploited by the tourism industry created a critical awareness about global relations and capitalism that has been crucial for the ways in which his engagement with climate change developed.

In 1985, Ulf came back to Sweden and started to work as a dog handler for a security company and as such became a Transport member. During this time, Ulf became the worker representative on the company board, during a period when the company was expanding internationally, which meant
that Ulf came to work with processes of acquiring other companies in other countries, and with global relations and worker’s rights from a worker and unionist perspective. These experiences further strengthened the importance of international relations and global justice for Ulf’s political views, and also for his union engagement. Around the millennial turn, Ulf was asked by the Gothenburg branch of the Swedish Transport Workers’ Union to work with them. Ulf accepted this offer and has worked as the regional health and safety officer for 15 years. Besides health and safety, he also handles insurance matters, and standardization issues in relation to the European Commission.

While Ulf talks about becoming environmentally aware in his early childhood, he also describes experiencing a decisive ‘turning point’ in 2007, when his critical understanding of the relationship between capitalism, global justice, and climate change deepened:

Ulf

Well, international solidarity was always there, and the environmental thing too. But in 2007 I read two books, and that was a real turning point for me. The first was Andreas Malm’s […] book about climate change Malm (2007) – really good book, I don’t think anything better has been written ever since. […] And at the same time Naomi Klein’s Shock Doctrine Klein (2007) came out. […] At that time Naomi Klein wasn’t writing about climate change so much, but reading the two books at the same time, I realised that these things are connected [and that] it’s important that we deal with this.

Of course, it was always there, I had followed the environmental movement, Naturvårdsverket, Greenpeace, and everything. It’s not like I didn’t see it. But I was never active myself, I never engaged myself with it, but now realised that I had to think things through carefully.

And then shortly after that, in the spring of 2008, the European Social Forum [ESF] was taking place in Malmö […] So that was really exciting, and it was even the case that Transport was involved with that. We were actually the union engaged the most with it, because there was a guy in the union’s executive committee who was very engaged […] saying ‘this is really important, we have to be a part of this’.

There were other unions that thought this was important too. So we were planning to work with this, and I took a course […] in order to prepare for ESF, to learn more about these issues and what this is.

As the quote shows, Ulf describes the turning point as linked primarily to making a connection between two problems that resonated deeply with him because of his personal experiences, namely the relationship between globalized capitalism and the exploitation of workers and resources in developing economies, to the relationship between production and climate change. The books he read provided Ulf with a theoretical framework for analysing the relationship between these problems and their cause but also, and perhaps more importantly, with an understanding that working politically with global justice could not be separated from taking action against climate change. In other words, these events and processes and the literature he read constituted a turning point in Ulf’s life because they transformed how he identified as a trade unionist. At this point, Ulf also found a context for action in the global justice movement, like the World Social Forum, and ESF, because they aimed to create a space in which coalitions between different civil society groups – such as the trade union movement and climate activists – could be organized.

The fact that Transport was engaged to participate in the 2008 ESF, to be held in the geographically close city of Malmö, provided Ulf with a concrete opportunity to try to engage his union in such coalitions. Motivated and inspired by this, Ulf started to read, and take courses, in order to educate himself further. During this period, Ulf also met a new partner, with strong personal ties to the global justice movement. As Ulf became more strongly engaged with both global justice and climate change activism, he joined organizations, such as the Africa groups of Sweden and Friends of the Earth Sweden.
In relation to these events, Ulf’s private social network became linked to people engaged with environmental activism and political activism. He also left the social democratic party, and became a member of the (socialist) Left party, which for him was related to the issue of climate change.

Separate worlds

Ulf was very excited and hopeful regarding his participation at the 2008 ESF in Malmö, but his experiences there made him realize that organizing coalitions between trade unions and other civil society activist groups was not an entirely straightforward process:

Ulf

And we’re working, and taking part in this ESF thing, which is a bit chaotic, down in Malmö. It’s difficult to organise, with a lot of non-profit groups, who aren’t that experienced, with structure and so on […] So, it didn’t turn out to be this gathering between civil society, and the trade unions who were there, that I was hoping for. Because, the organisers made some strategic mistakes […] it was so spread out […] people from all around the world, spread out all over the city, with different events in different places.

We were placed, somewhere in the city […] where they had like a plaza for trade unions, where all the unions were. And we had very good seminars, that Transport organised. Nothing about climate really, but things about global justice and so on. But very few people from civil society came to listen. I saw some people, the Africa group for example. But the trade unions weren’t able to reach the civil society organisations […] And in the meetings people were going ‘what are we doing here if nobody’s coming’. ‘Well, did you go to the other events’, I said, because I was running back and forth, trying to build bridges. I organised seminars through the Africa group. We had a seminar with a woman from a female trade union in South Africa called Sikula Sonke, for female workers in the Stellenbosh wine district – which is a fantastic trade union – but nobody came to listen.

It’s like two separate worlds. And it’s difficult, because there is some scepticism in civil society organisations towards the trade union movement. They think we’re, you know, old grey men. Which I can agree with in part (laughs). So, it wasn’t as successful as one would have thought.

In this quote, Ulf describes the challenges to establishing dialogues between the labour movement and other civil society organizations as partly related to spatial and organizational issues at the 2008 ESF. What we recognize is the reluctance on both sides to listen to the other. Ulf speaks of ‘separate worlds’ and the interesting issue is perhaps that both worlds want to talk to the other, but neither wants to listen to what the other has to say. In our conversation, Ulf often refers to alliances between unions and other civil society organizations as being much more common in the African than in the Scandinavian context. He would like the Swedish unions to learn from the African ones, but does not foresee this happening easily. To Ulf, the mutual deafness of unions and other civil society organizations he observed at the ESF represents a fundamental weakness of the Scandinavian unions and social movements. He suggests existing conflicts between the movements when he talks about ‘scepticism […] towards the trade union movement’ by other movements. However, there is also significant resistance towards climate action within Ulf’s organization. In the following sections, I will direct attention to the ways in which Ulf has been able to work with climate change in his organization in spite of this.

Organizational challenges

Even though Ulf describes difficulties in trying to establish dialogues between unions and other civil society activists, his participation at events such as ESF and the Conference of the Parties
(COP) has produced important outcomes. For one, Ulf has become acquainted with a network of other individuals in the trade union movement engaged with climate change, most notably people within the ITF, and he has also come to gain a reputation within his own organization as an engaged and knowledgeable person regarding climate change issues. Therefore, Ulf has been able to create conditions for working with climate change successfully in his union in a number of ways. Throughout our conversation, Ulf often mentions the support from ITF as particularly crucial for him being able to work with climate issues in Transport. It is for instance often through ITF, rather than his national or local Transport organizations, that Ulf has been able to organize funding for travelling to international events (for which he has often been required to use vacation time to attend).

A particularly important outcome of Ulf’s international networking, and his ITF relations, is the climate report published by Transport in 2013. In the following Ulf describes how the process of producing the report was unfolded:

**Ulf**

Before [going to COP17], I had contacted my friends at ITF and told them I was coming, and that I would like to meet them. They said ‘That’s great, Ulf! Why don’t you come here and tell us about what you’re doing’ […] and we connected really well […] and […] at COP17, ITF also presented their climate report […] that everybody thinks is the most progressive so far, and I haven’t seen that any union has written anything better […] and in the middle of all this […] one of the leaders at LO-TCO Biståndsnämnd⁴ – Union to Union today – said to me […] ‘Ulf, we have some money […] Would you consider writing a Swedish version of the ITF-report?’ And I said ‘Yes, absolutely!’.

So when we get back from Durban [we] write an application, and I get [the money] to do this, and I write a plan for the project. But, then my local branch, who owns the project, says no. […] They say this is not something we should be working with, and definitely not at the local level. If we should be working with this at all, it should be done centrally, in Stockholm.

So, in disappointment, I turn the project over to the [national organisation], and they then say yes. ‘OK, we’ll own the project, but we want you to do it, Ulf. Let’s do this!’ But then my local branch says no once again, ‘you can’t work with this’. They control my working time, you know, and, they won’t let me have the time I need to do this. So, when this can’t be solved, I get a little disappointed.

And then they, well … Then they brought someone else in to do this […] who used to work as a journalist for our magazine Transportarbetaren […] But I still got to work on it, because he didn’t have knowledge about these issues. So I go with him to ITF in London, and present him to all the friends there, and you know, at Biståndsnämnden and so on. So I was in the background, so to say, and I did put some time into this.

The report, ‘Transport och klimathotet’ (Transportarbetareförbundet, 2013),⁵ is an often re-occurring point of reference during my conversation with Ulf. First, as perhaps the most important of Transport’s climate work so far, and for being instrumental in introducing climate change as a significant topic into the organization’s agenda. But for Ulf – although he did not have the role he initially planned to have in writing it – it is also a manifestation of his individual efforts. While the report stands out as an ambitious and progressive piece of work about climate change in Sweden’s union context, it is also an illustrative example of the role of individuals for introducing climate change into the agenda of trade unions. As the quote above shows, Ulf created the conditions for producing the report by organizing support and resources from outside his local organization, specifically from ITF and the national Transport headquarters. However, Ulf also created these conditions in spite of resistance, found in his local organization.
Resistance was caused in part by the separation of responsibilities between the national union headquarters and the local branches, such that policy development has come to be regarded as not belonging to the local branch offices or members. In this particular case, the organizational structure limits the conditions for engaging with grassroots interests in processes of policy development. While this kind of disconnect between headquarters and members has been discussed (Lundström, 2017; Lundström et al., 2015), Transport’s climate report shows that individuals can overcome organizational divide by mobilizing means of resistance. While Ulf found such means primarily in the federation structures of ITF and in Transport’s national headquarters, he has also experienced disappointment and frustration. In relation to these experiences, Ulf says that he believes that a system of green reps, such as the one organized by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the UK (see TUC, 2008; Hampton, 2018), whereby a network of individuals responsible for managing climate change issues is established within the organization, would be very good in the Swedish union context. Ulf has promoted this idea at the Transport headquarters. However, despite positive responses, they have yet not provided resources for its realization.

The ways in which Ulf describes the disengagement of his own organization with issues relating to climate change and global justice, could be described as an effect of the labour market integration of Swedish unions, and the fact that Swedish unions can be defined as ‘business unions’ (Hyman, 2001) focussing on quantitative and technical aspects of work, such as salaries and working hours. When unions concentrate only on the needs of members in their specific sectors, they tend to become blind to the relations between sectors, their impact on the climate or the impact of climate change on the lives of people outside work.

On a more general level, Ulf’s difficulties in finding time and creating spaces for discussing issues such as climate change and global justice with other individuals in his organization, support arguments advanced by other authors (Hrynyshyn & Ross, 2011; Snell & Fairbrother, 2010), that conditions for bringing climate change into the agenda of unions also require a shift towards community, or social movement unionism (Lipsig-Mummé, 2003; Wills, 2001), that allows the organization of alliances beyond specific sectors and workplaces (Hrynyshyn & Ross, 2011; Snell & Fairbrother, 2010).

**Resistance among members**

I will now turn to how Ulf describes the resistance he has faced when talking to members about climate change. When Ulf meets members, it is commonly in relation to issues of health and safety, and insurance matters. But, since he is one of very few people in his organization engaged with climate activism, he does have extensive experience from talking to members about that. Based on these experiences, Ulf often comes back to the fact that there can be significant resistance towards climate action, since many members feel that it threatens their livelihood:

**Ulf**

[M]any of our members, who drive trucks, some of them have chosen that profession because they are interested in cars. They see the fossil fuel industry and motors as their way of life, and that it’s threatened now […] And […] when they hear that transports are causing 41% of all emissions in Sweden, including international transports, they think they’re going to lose their jobs […] And then I say ‘No, of course there will be transports’. But of course, […] unnecessary transports might have to go, and maybe there will be fewer people driving trucks […] But transport will still be there. Perhaps even more so, as Internet markets develop. Instead of taking your car to the shopping centres, it’s a hell of a lot easier if you order it online, and then have a company deliver it to you, preferably in an environmentally
friendly way. That’s better for everyone. We need to talk in these terms, and try to convince people, and not focus on the obstacles.

I’ve got a good example. Two years ago, we organised – and we have been doing this for a few years now – a bicycling manifestation in Gothenburg. […] And as I was cycling up and down the Avenue, I met one of our safety reps, who’s working for a bus company. He asked me ‘What are you doing?’ So I explained to him ‘Well, I’m doing this to show that we need a car free city, for the climate, and so on and so forth’. And he said ‘Oh shit! Don’t you want me to drive here?’, and I said ‘No, it’s precisely the opposite, I want YOU to drive here, but not all these cars that are in your way all the time (laughs). So that you can have a better working environment, and won’t have to push yourself too hard, you know, with keeping times and everything’. And then he said ‘Oh! Well that sounds fantastic!’. So, by talking about it, and understanding it, getting closer to people, that’s what you need to do. In groups, they’re very scared.

With gas stations it’s the same thing, with the congestion tax. That’s a typical example where, here [at Transport], they’re working against the congestion tax in Gothenburg, and I was the only one voting for it. And in the beginning, there was a huge effect, almost 30%. That impacted heavily on some of our gas stations […] and they had to lay people off. Then, of course, it’s not easy for me as a union representative to tell them ‘Well, unfortunately you’re going to lose your job’ – often they’re quite young – ‘but we have to do this for the environment’.

For someone who’s dependent on their salary, who’s young and has no unemployment insurance – which is crap today, [it’s] not worth anything anymore – and there are no other systems protecting you either. When the labour market is the way it is today, of course, it’s not that easy to explain to people, and get them to join you. That’s the social and the economic dimension, of sustainability. These three things have to work together. I try to talk about that, but it’s not easy. Many people think we’re just silly environmentalists, there’s a lot of name calling.

As this quote shows, Ulf describes his discussions with members about climate change as sometimes quite successful. Although he finds fear and resistance towards climate concerns among members, he nevertheless claimed that it is ‘not difficult at all’ to talk to with them about it. He is able to engage in conversations with individuals and to provide arguments about the creation of new jobs. He talked about the importance of ‘getting closer’ to people, and contrasts this to his observation that fear ‘in groups’ is more difficult to handle. To Ulf, getting closer is crucially about discussing how climate change and climate action relate to the everyday life of the individual worker across a wider range of issues in addition to those that brings them together as Transport members. Individual conversations allow Ulf to transcend his role as a health and safety officer, and act as a social movement unionist.

In the quote above, Ulf furthermore describes resistance among members as related primarily to experiences of social and economic precariousness, linked to the dismantling of the welfare state. Therefore, he argues that increased levels of social and economic security, provided by the welfare state, and redistributing the available employment across the population, are important conditions for enabling workers to engage with climate change. This is also related to the ways in which Ulf explains how the agenda of his union is beginning to change, by introducing policies for decreased working time into Transport’s agenda:

Ulf

I believe very strongly in citizen income and decreased working time, which are difficult questions to discuss in the trade union movement. But now – three years ago, I went [to Congress] and made the argument – I’ve managed to get support from Congress for Transport to work for a 30 hour working
There are many arguments for this. There was a long discussion, in which climate arguments played a role, but there are other arguments as well. And I think that when you explain it to people, and when they see how this relates to their everyday – which was what I was aiming for in my arguments – then people listen.

Thus, demands for a decreased working time were successful at the union Congress because they were connected to a vision for change that resonated with the everyday experiences of members. While the arguments for decreased working time were not primarily about the climate, they could be linked to climate arguments, in a discussion about the relationship between working time and private time. It is interesting to note how the idea of reducing or sharing working time – an argument that does not sit too well with the tradition of unions to not interfere with the employers’ right to manage and assign work in accordance with the Swedish model of labour market consensus (Korpi, 1983; Thullberg & Östberg, 1994) – allows Ulf to create a space for talking about climate change. Furthermore, it enables him to challenge the leadership of his union successfully. Similar to the ways in which he described individual discussion with members, Ulf describes the discussions at Congress about decreased working time in terms of ‘getting closer’ to members, and doing so by widening the scope of union policy discussions to include aspects of life outside work. In a later conversation we had, Ulf described these discussions at the union Congress like this:

**Ulf**

People recognise themselves … Those of us that actually have jobs, we’re working ourselves to death. And one way of doing something about this, is to share the working time that’s available.

The significance Ulf attributes to individual conversations, can also be related to his observation that a key difference between trade unions and climate activists, is that while the former tend to focus on changing structures, i.e. the institutions and regulations under which a particular sector of the labour market operates, the latter also direct attention to the role of the individual by talking about the responsibilities of individuals, since the ways in which they live and organize their everyday has an impact on the climate as well. This is relevant because according to Ulf, climate change activism requires you to engage simultaneously in changing the ways in which the economy is organized, and the ways in which you live your life as an individual, in the professional as well as the private domain. For Ulf, this means for instance taking the train rather than flying when travelling in his job.

The fact that trade unions find it difficult to engage with individual experiences and responsibilities in relation to the issue of climate change, reflect a general unwillingness to engage with discourses that do not fit too well with the service model of unionism (see Heery & Kelly, 1994), that is relationships between union officials and members where the former provide services to the latter. While processes of greening unions may enable mobilization of interests based on how climate change impacts negatively on the lives of workers, it might also – as Ulf suggests above – require unions to challenge the ways in which workers conceptualize their ‘way of life’.

**Concluding remarks**

Ulf often stressed the importance of developing visions for, and knowledge about, the ways in which a transformation of the economy can create new kinds of jobs, which is also what the climate report published by Transport (2013) primarily provides. However, while arguments about the creation of
new green jobs sometimes acknowledge the impact of (the current) production on the climate, they commonly do not challenge the overarching relations of production, nor do they provide new visions for the role of workers and unions in the economy. In other words, they promote a quite comfortable discourse, similar to the ‘technological fix’ arguments, and in line with the post-political logic of consensus reproduced by the discourses of ‘ecological modernization’ (Bailey & Caprotti, 2014). They may acknowledge the validity of climate concerns, but they do not challenge the social and economic relations that are causing climate change in the first place.

In my conversation with Ulf, as well as in interviews with other green union officials, it became clear that the Swedish context presents union officials working with climate change with difficulties and resistance. It may seem surprising that a union context characterized by high membership levels, and thus significant labour movement power constitutes such a discouraging context for climate change activism. Perhaps strong unions are even less likely to see the need for new perspectives, and for establishing alliances with other civil society organizations, in order to improve their political power. It could also be argued that the tradition of the Swedish model (Korpi, 1983; Thullberg & Östberg, 1994) in which the right of employers to organize production and manage work is seen to protect growth, does not create favourable conditions for climate discourses that go beyond ‘ecological modernization’. This explains why Ulf finds inspiration and visions for future strategies in the South African and British unions.

In Ulf’s view, green jobs do not provide the most important argument for changing the union’s political agenda. Rather, it is in discussions through which he is ‘getting closer’ to members, and is able to learn how working in capitalist production processes impacts on their everyday lives and on the climate, that key strategies for transforming unions emerge. It is through such dialogue that Ulf has come to realize that a central strategy for integrating climate change into the agenda of trade unions is to connect the areas of climate policies, social policies, and labour market policies. In the analysis presented above, this reasoning emerges in relation to the ways in which decreased working time has been taken up by Transport. The idea that the conditions for unions to engage with climate change also requires them to work for increased social and economic security has been advanced by other green unionists. It has also been pointed out that it is by engaging with the needs and experiences of the membership that more concrete visions for how unions can connect social and climate policy can be developed (Lundström, 2017). However, Ulf’s story also illustrates that such visions – at least in the context of Sweden – can come in direct conflict with other interests in the unions.

On a more general level, Ulf’s experiences show that working with climate change in the Swedish trade union context also involves challenging the consensus tradition of the Swedish model. Thus, it needs to be understood that unionists aiming to introduce climate change policies into their organization will create conflicts. The ways in which Ulf describes his role in mobilizing support for decreased working time at the union Congress and thus transforming the agenda of his union, is reminiscent of how Gramsci (1999) described the role of an ‘organic intellectual’, namely as someone who is able to challenge the dominant hegemony and organize a new consensus ‘organically’, by initiating a process of mutual learning, and introducing climate change arguments in connection to the everyday experiences of workers. By arguing for his position in opposition to the leadership, and mobilizing the interests of members at the union Congress, Ulf has been able to initiate a process through which the political agenda of his union can start to change. A key result of the analysis presented here is that business unionism, and high levels of specialization, are not only unfavourable conditions for introducing new perspectives and ideas into union strategies, they also produce conflicts, especially concerning the issue of climate change. While Ulf’s work has aimed to build bridges
between his union, other unions, and other civil society organizations, it is not primarily through these efforts that he has identified strategies for introducing new ideas into the union. While his connections to other unions and other contexts have been important as sources of support and inspiration, it was by engaging with conflicts and interests within his own organization – most notably the membership – that Ulf developed the most relevant strategies for greening the union.

Ulf’s story shows that green organic intellectuals in unions need to introduce climate change arguments that resonate with the experiences of workers, and to be successful, also mobilize support for such arguments and be able to challenge the established consensus and leadership in the organization. In Ulf’s case, his ability to engage in these practices relates to the way in which his environmental awareness came to develop, and how this in turn transformed how he identified as a trade unionist, and motivated him to focus his union work on climate justice. Being knowledgeable about climate change, and being connected to other environmentalist activists in the (international) union structure, has provided Ulf with a position from which he has the legitimacy to introduce climate change arguments both in discussions with members, but also in relation to the leadership, of his union. Ulf’s experiences from introducing climate change arguments successfully into the debate about decreased working time at Transport’s Congress furthermore direct attention to the role of organic intellectuals in the public domain. An interesting question for future research would be to analyse under what conditions trade unionists can create spaces in public debates for discussing the ways in which climate change impacts on the everyday lives of workers, how such discussions can produce new visions for climate justice, and how they can be integrated into the political agenda of the labour movement.

Notes

1. Moments of danger, moments of opportunity: the role of individuals as change agents in organisations. A qualitative and quantitative study of trade union officials in national and international unions, funded by Vetenskapsrådet (The Swedish Research Council). The research team of 11 persons included researchers in Brazil, India, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, and the UK.
2. Military service was mandatory for men in Sweden between 1901 and 2010.
3. Transportarbetareförbundet, avdelning 3.
4. LO-TCO Biståndsnämnd is an organisation funded by the two largest confederations in Sweden, LO (blue collar) and TCO (white collar), primarily to work with developing relations between Swedish and international trade unions.
5. Translated into English: ‘Transport and the climate threat’.
6. ‘Cykeldemonstrationen’ [The Biking Manifestation] is a manifestation to promote bicycling and to create awareness about the climate consequences of driving organised by a network of environmentalist groups in the Gothenburg area.

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