

interview

Union:
IF Metall
Country:
Sweden
Text:
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MARIE NILSSON

Elected in May last year, Marie Nilsson is president of Swedish industrial workers' union IF Metall, a union with a predominately male membership. In October 2017, the #MeToo movement, highlighting sexual harassment against women, started to gain momentum and the response in Sweden was huge, with some analysts comparing the movement to when women achieved the right to vote.

Marie Nilsson says there is a very clear before and after #MeToo, and that IF Metall reacted quickly when the discussions reached the trade unions.

“Questions on sexual harassment have always been part of our surveys on workplace environment but never a substantial part of it. But when we realized the extent of #MeToo, we asked the questions in a different way and the answers were different, especially from young women.

“I was shocked how widespread sexual harassment is, even knowing that we work in a male dominated environment. And I was appalled; we want to organize women and if we do nothing they will leave the union.

“There is a legal framework and guidelines in Sweden, but they are of little use if they are just stuck on a shelf and not used. Employees need to know who to turn to, and that their concerns are taken seriously. And employers and unions share this responsibility.”

IF Metall has met with employers to discuss the problem of sexual harassment in the workplace, and they are taking action together. A number of joint conferences are planned with an employer organization to discuss the issue together with the local union and the company management in the workplace.

“I am pleased that we are doing this together with the employers. It shows that we agree on the basic principle to fight sexual harassment in the workplace and that we take it seriously.”

1 Marie Nilsson. *IF Metall*

2 Marie Nilsson at IndustriALL Congress 2016 in Rio. *IndustriALL*

What can unions do?

“What happens in the workplace is the employer’s responsibility, but as unions we need to be there and take our responsibility. As IF Metall, we are making sure that our regional and local organizations know how to handle cases of sexual harassment.”

Several groupings of professionals have taken to social media in Sweden to talk about experiences in their workplaces. For example journalists, actresses and hospital staff have shared their testimonies of sexual harassment. And the hashtag #InteFörhandlingsbart (non-negotiable) has put focus on sexual harassment in the union movement.

“We have had cases of union representatives behaving inappropriately, which is very difficult for everyone involved. When everyone knows each other there has to be clear instructions on how to deal with it, and maybe move it from a local level to a regional level.

“The discussion on what is ok and what is not has been very important. Even though it is sometimes hard to discuss when sexual harassment happens internally, we have a responsibility and can’t be seen as covering it up.

“And that is why IF Metall has called on our counterparts in industry to use this as a wakeup call. All companies should have a policy and actively work to combat sexual harassment, violation and gender-based discrimination. There has to be zero tolerance.”

How is IF Metall approaching Industry 4.0?

“Industry 4.0 is, without a doubt, our most important challenge. We look at technical development as something positive. We know some jobs will disappear, but we also know there will be new ones.

“Although digitalization has huge effects, it is not really news for us. We have been through this before. But today it is faster and it also touches society as a whole.

“We think the major breakthroughs will come in the next five years or so. This will affect not only those who are new to the labour market, but also the ones already in employment. As a trade union, we have to be part of that journey as a reliable partner in the transformation.

“So we are working on how to make sure our members will have the right skills to be employable in the future. Most of our members work in export industries and they need a safe transition.”

Union membership is going down in Sweden, a country with a traditionally high union density. What is IF Metall doing to counter the trend?

“From 2006 we lost 10,000 members per year but in 2017 we actually increased our membership with 800 new members.

“Organizing is a clear priority. And that is not only organizing new members but also about making sure existing members do not leave IF Metall. We need to talk to them and find out why they want to leave.

“Not knowing why they should be members of a union, not seeing the benefits, are often cited as reasons for leaving. They feel as if no one cares, they are disappointed in us as an organization, we haven’t been present enough and they haven’t received the service they expected or needed.

“To grow, we need to make sure that every new employee is asked to join IF Metall. Younger workers are not always interested, but we have to ask them and motivate them - joining a union is no longer only about solidarity.

“We also inform about trade unions in schools. We know that if we can reach people while they are still in school, they will know what a union is when they enter the workplace and are more likely to become a member.”

With historically close ties to Sweden’s governing party, the Social Democratic Party and Prime Minister Stefan Löfvén, a former IF Metall president, IF Metall is a highly political trade union. How are you preparing for the government elections in September?

“The elections are a large part of our focus this year, especially as opinion polls currently show a tie between the social democrats and the conservative block.

“Until September, political work will be an important part of what we do. Before the current government, we had eight years of conservative rule and as a union we were marginalized. During the recession and economic crisis, Sweden’s industry shrunk and 48,000 of our members lost

their jobs. Despite lobbying relevant ministers and government departments to find solutions we were seen as irrelevant.

“We know from experiences in Germany and Belgium that there are ways of dealing with economic crisis where the government, employers and workers share the burden, by reducing working hours for example. But we got the cold shoulder when trying to protect our members. So we know what a conservative government will mean for our members, and we want a government that supports industrial development.

“We have produced material to distribute in the workplace and 36 of our local unions have appointed so called election leaders, who will take the discussion in the workplace about what the election means for the labour market, the industry and the union.

Most importantly, we want everyone to vote. Like many other countries, Sweden has seen a surge in right wing politics and those ideologies often benefit from low numbers of voters.”

IF METALL

- ▶ 310,000 members, of whom 20 per cent are women
- ▶ 78 per cent of members work in manufacturing industries, mostly auto, with car maker Volvo being the biggest employer
- ▶ Marie Nilsson is IndustriALL vice president for Europe and part of IndustriALL’s Executive Committee

