

## **Women and Wildcats: Unofficial Women's Strikes in Sweden in the 1970s and 1980s**

*Christer Thörnqvist and Susanne Fransson*

### **ABSTRACT**

While the strike propensity in manufacturing declined in the 1980s and 1990s, it remained high or even increased in services, health care, education and so on. The growing portion of tertiary sector employment has further moved the searchlight from men to women, as the demographic transformation in work has promoted a feminization of strikes. However, what if we go back in history, to when strikes and industrial conflict was still mainly a men's concern? Did women go on strike at all, and if so, how did their strikes differ from the overall pattern? The 1970s was the decade of "resurgence of class conflict" in Western societies, including Sweden, with an outstanding upsurge of strikes in many countries. There is an affluence of studies of both the 1970s strike-waves and single strikes in this rebellious decade, but few of them deal with female-dominated strikes. This article explores women's strikes in Sweden in the 1970s and 1980s with special attention to the treatment in the Labour Court, since the article finds a remarkable difference in legal outcome between "male" and "female" strikes.

### **KEYWORDS**

Wildcat strikes, Sweden, 1970s-1980s, Feminization of strikes, Labour Court

# I Introduction

For about two and a half decades, there has been a move towards tertiarization and feminization of industrial conflict in Western societies. While the strike propensity in manufacturing declined in the 1980s and 1990s, it remained high, in fact even increased, in the tertiary sector (services, health care, education and so on).<sup>1</sup> The growing portion of tertiary sector employment has further moved the focus from men to women, as the demographic transformation in work has promoted a feminization of strikes.<sup>2</sup> But is a “feminization” of strikes just a move of strike activities from male-dominated occupations to female-dominated ones?

It is clear that the dividing line goes between occupations and industries, not between men and women *per se*. Yet, occupational differences are themselves gendered. In the words of Linda Briskin, this is crucial for understanding women’s strikes: “As a system of social power, gender structures social organization, and produces and reproduces hierarchies and inequalities, and men’s privilege. Via institutions, policies, laws, ideologies and everyday practices, it structures work (as does class relations)”.<sup>3</sup> Briskin’s primary concern was Canadian nurses’ strikes, but her view is both international and cross-sectoral. However, what if we go back in history, to when strikes and industrial conflict was still mainly men’s concern? Did women go on strike at all, and if so, how did their strikes differ from the overall pattern?

*Our aim is therefore to explore women’s strikes in Sweden in the 1970s and 1980s.* The 1970s was the decade of the “resurgence of class conflict” in Western societies, with an outstanding upsurge of strikes in many countries.<sup>4</sup> There is an affluence of studies of both the 1970s strike waves and single strikes in this “rebellious” decade, but few of them make any distinctions between male- and female-dominated strikes. The strike was still in the 1970s and 1980s a “male” conflict weapon, employed by blue-collar workers in manufacturing, mines, harbours and so on. In the early 1990s, the Finnish scholars Raija Julkunen and Liisa Rantalaiho provokingly asked if there really were no women on strike, or if they were just “silenced” in labour history and sociology: “The tacit presumption that the history of the working class is the history of male workers has been preserved

---

<sup>1</sup> BORDOGNA, Lorenzo and CELLA, Gian Primo. “Decline or Transformation? Change in Industrial Conflict and its Challenges”. *Transfer*, vol. 8 (4), 2002.

<sup>2</sup> VAN DER VELDEN, Sjaak. “Introduction”. In: VAN DER VELDEN, Sjaak; DRIBBUSCH, Heiner; LYDDON, Dave and VANDAELE, Kurt. *Strikes Around the World: Case-Studies of 15 Countries*. Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007, p. 18; BRISKIN, Linda. “Nurse Militancy and Strike Action”. *Workers of the World – International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflict*. vol.1, n.2, January 2013, pp. 212-15.

<sup>3</sup> BRISKIN. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> CROUCH, Colin and PIZZORNO, Alessandro (eds.) *The Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe Since 1968: Volume I, National Studies*. London: Macmillan, 1978.

intact”, they claimed, and “a woman on strike is an anomaly, a silenced and deviant case”.<sup>5</sup>

In the following article we shall therefore highlight those less known women’s strikes in the 1970s and 1980s. We limit the study to strikes in our home country, Sweden. Yet we believe that the results will be of general interest, as Sweden fits very well into the international strike wave pattern in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>6</sup> We will also relate the female-dominated strikes we discuss to the male-dominated ones in the same period. Swedish legislation makes a sharp distinction between official, legal strikes and unofficial “wildcat” strikes. The increase in the 1970s was solely due to the upswing of unofficial actions, and most female-dominated strikes were also wildcats. We therefore pay special attention to the treatment of women’s strikes in the Swedish Labour Court, following Briskin’s advice that “institutions, policies, laws, ideologies” are crucial to understand how the gender system affects gender differences in the labour market in general and industrial conflict in particular. Consequently, besides material from labour market organizations, mass media and interviews, we draw heavily on the Swedish Labour Court as an important source.

The next section gives an overview of the judicial framework. It is followed by a section dealing with the most prominent women’s strikes during the period, and thereafter a section dedicated to the treatment in the Labour Court. The final section summarizes the findings and presents our conclusions.

### **The legal framework**

Up to the late 1920s, there was no legal right to strike in Sweden. On the other hand, no legislation forbade it either. Both the government and organized capital saw strikes as potential threats to society though, and strikers could be met by police or even military forces. There was also a law from 1899 forbidding workers to encourage other workers to strike or to try to prevent them from strikebreaking. Moreover, strike participants violated individual employment contracts and could therefore be fired, blacklisted or even evicted from their homes.

In 1928, after protests from the labour movement, the right-wing government passed two new laws, the Collective Agreement Act and the Labour Court Act. Striking was now declared legal if a trade union had given due notice, but with the limitation that the previous collective agreement had expired; the conclusion of a collective agreement immediately led to a ban on strikes and lockouts. If this ban were broken, the new Labour Court could sentence the individual participant to pay damages up to 200 Swedish Kronor

---

<sup>5</sup>JULKUNEN, Raija and RANTALAIHO, Liisa. “Women On Strike – Nonexistent or Silenced?” In: KETTUNEN, Pauli (ed.) *Strike and Social Change*. Turku: Turun Maakuntamuseo, 1993, pp. 97.

<sup>6</sup>THÖRNQVIST, Christer. *Arbetarna lämnar fabriken: Strejkrörelser i Sverige under efterkrigstiden, deras bakgrund, förlopp och följder*. Göteborg: Avhandlingar från historiska institutionen i Göteborg 9, 1994, pp. 47-58.

(SEK), a sum that was about equal to a month's pay for a blue-collar worker at the time. There was also a considerable risk of getting fired.<sup>7</sup>

The Collective Agreement Act was still in force when the first post-war strike-wave hit Sweden in 1969-70. New labour market legislation was introduced in the mid-1970s that was to a large extent a result of the strong grass-root uprising; the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) and the social democratic government was more or less forced to introduce new laws. The outcome was, however, not exactly what the grass roots had expected. To strike was a democratic right guaranteed by the Governmental Act, one of the fundamental laws in Sweden. But, according to the new law, the 1976 Codetermination Act, it was not up to the individual to employ that right; a strike had to be launched by a trade union and only on the condition that it did not violate any collective agreement.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the damages one could have to pay for taking part in unofficial strikes increased about ten times, although the main stress was on the trade union, not on the individual; trade unions were obliged to act to prevent or stop wildcat strikes.<sup>9</sup>

The new legislation in the 1970s touched another sore spot in labour market regulation. Already in the so-called December Compromise of 1906, the LO had recognized the "freedom of work", that is, the employers' exclusive right to hire and fire, and to freely manage and distribute work. In return the Swedish Employers' Confederation (SAF), formally recognized workers' right to join unions and for unions to negotiate wages and working conditions on behalf of their members.<sup>10</sup> In 1974, however, the social democratic government introduced the Employment Security Act, which stated that firing could be legally challenged. Firings could not be reversed, but if the Court found them unjustified, the employer had to pay expensive damages. Taking part in unofficial strikes was at the same time declared a reason for firing, but that was just a codification of an existing practice. The Codetermination Act slightly modified the right, but brought no radical change.<sup>11</sup> The first precedent of the right to fire workers due to participation in a wildcat strike according to the new legislation was actually one of the women's strikes we will discuss below.

---

<sup>7</sup> GÖRANSSON, Håkan. *Kollektivavtalet som fredspliktsinstrument: De grundläggande förbuden mot stridsåtgärder i historisk och internationell belysning*. Stockholm: Juristförlaget, 1988, pp. 103, 207-09.

<sup>8</sup> FAHLBECK, Reinhold. "Industrial Relations and Collective Labour Law: Characteristics, Principles and Basic Features". In: WAHLGREN, Peter (ed.) *Stability and Change in Nordic Labour Law*. Stockholm: Stockholm Institute for Scandinavian Law, 2002, p. 125.

<sup>9</sup> THÖRNQVIST, Christer. "Hur trivialiteter blir ideologi: Vilda strejker i arbetsdomstolen under 20 år". *Arkiv för studier i arbetarrörelsens historia*. no. 72, 1998, pp. 46-47, 58-59. When the Social Democrats got back into office in 1985, the 200 SEK limit was reintroduced in Swedish law. The sum was then only symbolic, though; the damages should ideologically underline that strike actions not sanctioned by a trade union were not acceptable, but it should not threaten the strikers' personal economy (ibid. pp. 46-56, 61-63). The 200 SEK ceiling was once again lifted by the next centre-right government in 1992, and the "normal" sum has since been 2,000 SEK. Yet, on top of the damages, the strikers are normally sentenced to pay the struck company's court costs.

<sup>10</sup> FRANSSON, Susanne. *Lönediskriminering: En arbetsrättslig studie av könsdiskriminerande löneskillnader och konflikter mellan kollektivavtal och lag*. Uppsala: Iustus, 2000, p. 406.

<sup>11</sup> Government Bill 1975/76: 105, appendix 1, p. 294.

## Women on strike in the 1970s and 1980s

Women's share of the strike waves was only a small fraction of the total upsurge. An in-depth study of strikes in Sweden from 1975-79 shows that only 14 out of a total of more than 200 strikes, that is, 7 per cent, were organized by women. None of them were sanctioned by a trade union and thus were not protected by law.<sup>12</sup> Most wildcats were reactions against poor outcomes of firm-level negotiations, but some were protests against insulting behaviour from management, bad work environments, or piecework systems.<sup>13</sup> For a longer wildcat to be successful, financial support and media publicity were often crucial. As we will see, women's wildcats had a problem with this.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Cleaners' strike, ASAB 1974-75*

The Swedish strike-wave took off with the large, three months long, unofficial and much publicized miners' strike against the company LKAB in the very north of Sweden in December 1969. This certainly was a great upheaval that made a lasting impact on the Swedish labour market. Yet, miners were one of the most male-dominated occupational groups of all, and women were only noticed as miners' wives, supporting their husbands and taking care of the households during the austerity the lack of income caused. The first strike with women protagonists came almost exactly five years after. In the early 1970s, the company ASAB had grown to be Sweden's largest cleaning entrepreneur with some 8,000 employees. About 7,000 of them were hired on part-time contracts, 80 per cent were women and 30 per cent had non-Swedish citizenship. Furthermore, it was a common opinion among the cleaners that ASAB's take over led to a higher work pace and lower pay.<sup>15</sup> In the fall of 1974, ASAB introduced a new piecework system in all its operations. The new system increased the work pace without any pay compensation, and was thus the straw that broke the cleaning ladies' back. The Real Estate Workers' Union (*Fastighets*), had accepted the new pay system, but its members did not. Wildcat strikes broke out in five different places. It started at the ironworks Domnarvet in Borlänge, mid-Sweden, and spread to the ore fields in north Sweden, to hotels and stores in Umeå, also in the north of Sweden, to Arlanda airport outside Stockholm and to a hotel, Billingen, in Skövde in western Sweden. Roughly 350 cleaners – all of them women – were on strike.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> THÖRNQVIST, Christer. *Arbetarna lämnar fabriken: Strejkrörelser i Sverige under efterkrigstiden, deras bakgrund, förlopp och följder*. Göteborg: Avhandlingar från historiska institutionen i Göteborg. N.9, 1994, p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pp. 143-51.

<sup>14</sup> FRANSSON, Susanne and THÖRNQVIST, Christer. "Gender-specific Strategies for Industrial Action: The Swedish Case in Historical Perspective". In: FLEMING, Daniel and THÖRNQVIST, Christer (eds.) *Nordic Management-Labour Relations and Internationalization – Converging and Diverging Tendencies*. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2003, pp. 201-03.

<sup>15</sup> SCHMITZ, Eva. "Kan de strejka i Norge kan väl vi också": ASAB-städerskornas strejker under 1974 och 1975". *Arbetarhistoria*. No. 138-139, 2011, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> THÖRNQVIST, Christer. *Arbetarna lämnar fabriken: Strejkrörelser i Sverige under efterkrigstiden, deras bakgrund, förlopp och följder*. Op.Cit., pp. 125-26.

### *Domnarvet, Borlänge*

The uprising started at Domnarvet in Borlänge with a strike that lasted about one week. Although the strike violated the existing agreement, it led to a considerable wage increase.<sup>17</sup> The cleaners had recently formed a local trade union branch and when the strike emerged, all union representatives withdrew from their positions of trust to be able to join the non-sanctioned action without risking serious reprisals. This was at the time a rather common way for trade union representatives to act during wildcat actions in order to show solidarity with the workers at their own workplace rather than with the trade union's official policy.<sup>18</sup>

### *The ore fields in northern Sweden*

Another struck company was LKAB, where the strike lasted about a month. "Cleaners are humans too", a strikers' slogan declared, with a clear reference to the great miners' strike five years earlier in the same ore fields. The wages were gendered: former miners, who due to bad health or occupational injuries been transferred to cleaning, gained about twice the pay of female cleaners.<sup>19</sup> The trade union, *Fastighets*, took a hostile stand towards the strike, stating that the claim to maintain the former wage-setting system was "beyond reason". The strikers therefore elected a special strike committee to represent them. Besides the lack of support from their union, the cleaners had problems with strike breakers. According to the Work Environment Act, employers must always prevent health dangers and hazardous situations for people not taking part in a conflict. Hence, LKAB and ASAB could bring in personnel from other LKAB sites. The safety ombudsman took the side of the striking women and wanted to close parts of the workplace, but he had no legal means to prevent other cleaners doing the strikers' normal work tasks.<sup>20</sup>

Most of the striking women were married to miners and got strong support from the people in the area. Money remaining from a strike fund from the miners' strike in 1969-70 helped them financially. The outcome was that the strike did not stop the introduction of the new pay system, but the cleaners won a considerable wage raise as compensation. But also, the strike ended in the Labour Court and the participants were sentenced to pay damages for breaking the peace obligation. The damages were almost symbolic and nobody was fired, but the Labour Court made a clear ideological statement: one of the cleaners escaped the damages because she had wished to work, but was too afraid of harassment from the other workers to dare. Since she had notified the employer in writing before the strike, she was freed from all damages.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> JÄRHULT, Ragnar. *Nu eller aldrig! En bok om "den nya strejkrörelsen"*. Stockholm: Liber, 1982, p. 138.

<sup>18</sup> THÖRNQVIST, Christer. *Arbetarna lämnar fabriken: Strejkrörelser i Sverige under efterkrigstiden, deras bakgrund, förlopp och följder*. Op. Cit., pp. 143-55.

<sup>19</sup> JOHANSSON, Klas and GRAHM, Jessica. *Vi är ju ändå bara städerskor*. Göteborg: Barrikaden, 1975.

<sup>20</sup> JÄRHULT, Ragnar. *Nu eller aldrig! En bok om "den nya strejkrörelsen"*. Op. Cit., pp. 146-47.

<sup>21</sup> *Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1975 no. 16.

### *Hotell Billingen, Skövde*

The strikes at Domnarvet and LKAB were rather successful. In Skövde, though, the strike ended in a disaster – and in the Labour Court. When ASAB took over all cleaning business at Hotell Billingen in 1973, it shortened the average working day from eight to six-and-a-half hours, but instead extended the working week to six days and the limit for a performance bonus was raised.<sup>22</sup> Of a total of 20 cleaners, eight were hired by demand, meaning that they had a formal employment contract, but no regulated working hours, and accordingly only got paid for hours worked. Such employment contracts were later found unacceptable by the Labour Court.<sup>23</sup> There were further eight MTM managers following the 20 women, which they found highly provoking. Most of the women were members of *Fastighets*, but the protests against the new work organization got no union support. The cleaners therefore dissolved the local union branch and unanimously decided to go on a wildcat strike. Besides the claim to get back their former working contracts, the strike was a sympathetic strike for the conflicts in Borlänge and the mine-fields, and also to pressure a wage claim that had not been satisfied in the recent local negotiations. But already on the second day of the strike, two cleaners were fired as “strike leaders”; thereafter the main demand was to revoke their dismissal.<sup>24</sup> The remaining workers maintained the strike for 17 days, when, after a provisional decision by the Labour Court, they too got fired for “refusal to work”.<sup>25</sup>

The Skövde wildcat was better organized than the strikes in Borlänge and the ore fields. It was also more militant: the strikers literally occupied the workplace to prevent strike breaking. Thus, Skövde was more dangerous than the other two strikes in the eyes of ASAB. Another difference, and a disadvantage to the cleaners, was that the hotel’s guests were in general hostile to the strike. On the other hand, the cleaners got strong support from people all over Sweden and local support groups in different communities together collected 200,000 SEK to help them, a very high sum at the time.<sup>26</sup>

### *Arlanda airport and Umeå*

For sympathetic reasons, cleaners at Arlanda airport outside Stockholm carried out a four-day wildcat strike, demanding that the fired Skövde cleaners be re-hired and get “fair” treatment in the Labour Court. After promises from ASAB to treat the Skövde cleaners “fairly”, the strike was discontinued.<sup>27</sup> The strike in Umeå, located on the north-east coast

---

<sup>22</sup> JOHANSSON, P. O. and HELLMARK, Ann-Britt. *Från LKAB till ASAB: Strejker och lockouter på den svenska arbetsmarknaden 1970–74*. Stockholm: Arbetslivscentrum, 1981, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> *Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1975 no. 24 and no. 31.

<sup>24</sup> SCHMITZ, Eva. “Kan de strejka i Norge kan väl vi också”: ASAB-städerskornas strejker under 1974 och 1975”. *Op. Cit.*, p. 22. It is worth noticing that one of the “strike leaders” was born in 1955, accordingly only 19 years old at the time of the strike. JÄRHULT, Ragnar. *Nu eller aldrig! En bok om ”den nya strejkrörelsen”*. *Op. Cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>25</sup> *Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1975 no. 31.

<sup>26</sup> JÄRHULT, Ragnar. *Nu eller aldrig! En bok om ”den nya strejkrörelsen”*. *Op. Cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>27</sup> JOHANSSON, P. O. and HELLMARK, Ann-Britt. *Från LKAB till ASAB: Strejker och lockouter på den svenska arbetsmarknaden 1970–74*. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 58-59; SCHMITZ, Eva. “Kan de strejka i Norge kan väl vi också”: ASAB-städerskornas strejker under 1974 och 1975”. *Op. Cit.*, p. 23.

of Sweden, was also largely a sympathetic action. About 70 cleaners employed by ASAB and working at hotels, offices, and supermarkets, started a wildcat strike in support of their colleagues in Skövde, but also to press for wage increases. Some strikers returned to work after eight days, while others continued the strike for up to five weeks. Several of the strikers were sentenced to pay damages by the Labour Court.<sup>28</sup>

#### *The sewers' strike at Brason, Gällivare 1975*

In February 1975, when the ASAB cases were in progress in the Labour Court, a new all-women's strike broke out in Gällivare, a municipality in the north of Sweden, merged with the ore-field municipality Malmberget. 38 sewers at the garment company Brason lay down their work, primarily in protest against a new, performance-based piecework system, but also to demand a wage raise. The conflict was immediately deadlocked, as Brason refused to negotiate if the sewers did not first return to work. The sewers managed to hold out for two months, thanks to financial support from the LKAB miners' strike fund. Finally, the company presented an ultimatum: if the strikers did not immediately return to work, it would be considered voluntary resignation. 16 sewers returned, while 22 continued the strike. They lost much power though, and gave in a few weeks later. Brason, however, stuck to its claim that the workers had voluntarily left their employment and refused to take them back. Since the strike had lasted for more than two months, the sewers were not allowed to try their case in the Labour Court; the ASAB strikes had just set a precedent, which we will return to below.<sup>29</sup>

#### *IMA Uthyrningservice, Sundsvall, 1977*

In the autumn of 1977, the workers in the dry-cleaning firm IMA Uthyrningservice in Sundsvall, a city in the mid-north of Sweden, went on a wildcat strike. The strike was started by men, but the majority of the participants were women. The primary purpose was to bring pressure to bear on the ongoing firm-level negotiations, but the strike was also a reaction against a bad work environment. All the firm's 50 workers joined the strike, but after a day's break to await a new negotiation offer from the employer, only 26 of them, mostly women, continued. The major reason why only half the workforce continued to strike was that they felt unfairly treated in the shop-floor negotiations. The wage increase seemed to be unequally distributed among the workers, and the 26 workers who continued the strike would gain less from the local agreement. Hence, the strike was in one way also a discontentment with the local trade union branch. The strikers organized a strike committee with only women spokespersons. The outcome of the strike was a new local agreement the workers were seemingly very happy with. According to the striking workers themselves, they would never have settled such a fortunate agreement without the strike. The local manager who negotiated on IVA's behalf on the other hand declared that the raise was just due to a redistribution of the performance bonus among the workers; the employees who should have benefitted the most from the former agreement had

---

<sup>28</sup> *Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1975, no. 24.

<sup>29</sup> THÖRNQVIST, Christer. *Arbetarna lämnar fabriken: Strejkrörelser i Sverige under efterkrigstiden, deras bakgrund, förlopp och följder*. *Op. Cit.*, p. 126.



voluntarily given up their wage increases in favour of a general rise for all workers, which was “a very nice gesture”, in the words of the manager. Nor had the new agreement cost the company more than the first offer would have done.<sup>30</sup>

But successful or not, the strike also ended up in court. The Codetermination Act came into effect on 1 January 1977. The IMA strike, occurring in September 1977, was therefore one of the first wildcats to be tried under the new law. As the maximum damage of 200 SEK for individuals violating the ban on strikes disappeared, SAF saw an opportunity for employers to claim higher damages, and to start a campaign against unofficial industrial action in general.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, already after two days, IMA summoned the 26 workers who maintained the strike before the Labour Court. The court sentenced the strikers to pay damages, but, contrary to the employer’s claims, no higher than what was normal before the introduction of the new law.<sup>32</sup>

Another complication was that IMA Uthyrningsservice was not an independent firm. It was a subcontractor to the larger dry-cleaning company Tvättmans, which in turn was affiliated to Electrolux, a multinational company with its main interests in producing vacuum cleaners and white goods, especially kitchen machines. IMA’s main customers were local industries that normally needed their laundry back promptly. Therefore the board of Tvättmans decided to send all laundry to Örebro, 437 kilometres south of Sundsvall. Many of the workers in Örebro refused to “handle the strike wash”, as they expressed it. Yet, the local trade union branches disagreed in Örebro as well as in Sundsvall. On the one hand, trade union representatives were obliged by the Codetermination Act to condemn wildcat strikes and urge the workers to go back to work; if they did not, the union risked high damages. On the other hand, the local representatives were *not* obliged to help the employer in any other ways, which they actually did in the IMA case. Trade union representatives from IMA in Sundsvall travelled all the way to Örebro to help with the laundry at the Tvättman plant there, and the local trade union branch prevented the workers in Örebro from maintaining contacts with the strikers in Sundsvall. The employees in Örebro were strictly forbidden to take any calls from Sundsvall and the switchboard at Tvättman refused to reveal their home numbers. The ban on calls from Sundsvall encompassed *all* calls; when a local newspaper tried to contact Örebro workers for interviews, it got the message that neither the workers themselves nor their phone numbers were available as long as the strike in Sundsvall was still going on.<sup>33</sup>

### *Two important women’s wildcats in the 1980s*

---

<sup>30</sup> Material from the Swedish Mediation Institute’s archive, Riksarkivet, series H, September 1977.

<sup>31</sup> THÖRNQVIST, Christer. ”Hur trivialiteter blir ideologi: Vilda strejker i arbetsdomstolen under 20 år”. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 46-51.

<sup>32</sup> *Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1978, no. 19.

<sup>33</sup> Material from the Swedish Mediation Institute’s archive, Riksarkivet, series H, September 1977; *Sundsvalls Tidning*, 23 September 1977.

A wildcat strike with several similarities to the IMA conflict took place in Helsingborg in the south of Sweden in 1981. The firm-level negotiations at Viggo AB, a manufacturer of sterile surgical appliances, had ended in a stalemate. Against the trade union's recommendations, the workers refused the employer's bid and went on a wildcat strike. The strike was also a protest against rationalizations, poor working conditions and the threat of layoffs. Literally it was not just one strike, but a series of short sit-downs in the span of four days. The first sit-down counted on more than 100 employees out of a total of 580 workers, while the following actions counted on roughly 50-60 people each. The strike was, however, poorly organized. A vast majority of the participants were young women without any experience of negotiations, trade union work or strikes. The claims were rather modest compared to many other wildcats in the same period, but to set an example, Viggo AB brought every participant in the sit-downs before the Labour Court, which sentenced them all to pay damages.<sup>34</sup>

In 1985, Domnarvet in Borlänge was again struck by a wildcat cleaners' strike; as in 1974 it was directed against ASAB. The strike lasted for four weeks and encompassed 26 women, which was about half the total number of cleaners. Some of the other cleaners went on sick-leave to avoid taking sides in the conflict. Much like in 1974, the strike was directed against rationalization: 15 cleaners risked being fired according to ASAB's new organization plan. In a cynical way, the strike actually helped the company to downsize. ASAB fired 14 workers who had taken part in the strike, which meant that the company did not have to spend time or money on the normal procedures connected with firing. As in the 1974 strike, the cleaners had strong support from the male metal workers, who even threatened the firm with a legal sympathetic strike, which however only led to a judicial confusion.<sup>35</sup> The 14 fired workers did not just lose their jobs; together with their striking colleagues they were also sentenced by the Labour Court to pay damages.<sup>36</sup> A year and a half later, a thorough – but slow – inquiry by the Labour Court found that the firing was not in accordance with existing legislation and therefore illegal. The workers' individual employment contracts had therefore neither been broken nor expired. The court argued that when threatened with firing, the workers had tried to go back to work several times, but had been refused entrance to the workplace by the company. Their claim for damages was denied, but ASAB had to pay for their economic losses, that is, more than one year's salary for each of them.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Public sector wildcats, 1979-1989*

As in many industrialized countries, there are more women than men employed in the public sector in Sweden. In caring and nursing, it was already so in the 1970s. It is therefore not strange that some of the more noticeable women's strikes occurred in public

---

<sup>34</sup> *Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1981, no. 19; Material from the Swedish Mediation Institute's archive, Riksarkivet, series H, September 1981.

<sup>35</sup> *Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1987, no. 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1986, no. 20.

<sup>37</sup> THÖRNQVIST, Christer. "Hur trivialiteter blir ideologi: Vilda strejker i arbetsdomstolen under 20 år". *Op. Cit.*, pp. 53-54.

services. One of them was a 1979 wildcat among the personnel at several children's and youth custody centres in Stockholm. The employees had demonstrated against poor working conditions, but without any result. Hence, after a general meeting, they decided on a wildcat strike. The strike only lasted one week, but meanwhile five young persons under juvenile custody managed to escape. The strikers had given notice of their strike in order to give it a similar design as a legal action, although they were not backed up by their union. The outcome was however a defeat for the striking women, who were sentenced to pay damages by the Labour Court. The strike was extraordinary serious, the court argued, since former juvenile delinquents in urgent need of help risked a relapse into drug abuse, criminality or prostitution.<sup>38</sup>

Three other wildcat strikes in child/youth care occurred in 1986 and 1987. In one of them, eleven day care centres in Stockholm were closed down for one day. The children's parents had been warned of the action long before the outbreak; the personnel had explained to them that the strike was a reaction against a political decision to increase the number of children per centre beyond what the employees could handle. Many parents also joined the workers' rallies against the decision. The one-day demonstration had no union support, however, and was found illegal by the Labour Court which sentenced the participants to pay damages.<sup>39</sup>

In another case, 350 recreational pedagogues, a vast majority of them women, took action against a political reform they claimed would worsen their working conditions. Eight of them, the elected strike committee, were charged for breaking the peace obligation by the employer, the city of Gothenburg, and got sentenced by the Labour Court to pay damages.<sup>40</sup> Also in Gothenburg, a decision by the Gothenburg Local Council to reduce supplies for the child care system was met by a one day long wildcat strike from 541 child care workers, most of them women. Despite the fact that the strike was short, 89 of the participants were summoned to the labour court. As in the case with the recreational pedagogues, the city of Gothenburg decided not to charge all the strikers. Yet, in this case the employer more openly stated the principles for the selection. The summoned people all had either particularly great responsibility, such as superintendents and union representatives, or had acted "especially irresponsible", which in practice meant that they had also taken part in a strike one year earlier. The trade union refused to represent the strikers in the court, which was most unusual. The standard court procedure for handling unofficial actions was that a representative of the charged workers' union would agree that the strike ban had been violated, but then would plead extenuating circumstances to minimize the damages. Instead the majority of the summoned workers were represented by a legal representative who was specialized in the law of procedure and with little skills in labour law. The representative even pleaded circumstances he thought were extenuatory, but in fact worsened the workers' violation of the peace obligation in the

---

<sup>38</sup> *Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1979, no. 97.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1986, no. 108.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 1986, no. 127.

eyes of the court. Accordingly, the court sentenced all 89 summoned employees to pay damages.<sup>41</sup>

The vast majority of wildcat strikes in Sweden in the 1970s-80s were “spontaneous” shop-floor outbursts. The three public sector wildcats we just discussed were, on the contrary, planned manifestations and the participants gave notice in advance in order to limit the problems for the so-called third party. The best prepared and organized wildcat strike of all was, however, a day long mobilization in Gothenburg in November 1988, carried out by 436 social welfare secretaries, all of them trained social workers and most of them women, in order to put pressure on the city in the ongoing local bargaining with claims exceptionally high for local negotiations. The strikers had formed a special committee in advance, “Gothenburg social welfare secretaries for a decent salary”. The action was further backed up by other demonstrations: 300 employees rallied outside the bargaining hall in support of their negotiators; 200 of them registered as job applicants at the Gothenburg employment agency; and 67 people advertised in the local newspaper under the heading “Employers, look here!”. All but 15 of the 436 participants were brought before the Labour Court, but only 27 of the summoned employees were represented by their union. The plea for extenuating circumstances differed from the preceding women wildcats in the public sector in one important manner. The strikers argued that the claim for higher salaries was not based on “market value”, but on “utility value” and “fairness”. They argued that their job was depreciated, considering the high qualifications needed and the mental strains of the job. Yet the Labour Court was not moved by this: all 421 charged employees were sentenced to pay damages.<sup>42</sup> And for the sake of completeness, in 1989, about 180 employees, mostly women, in child care in Stockholm carried out a wildcat strike very similar to the preceding ones. It was a protest against reductions of public expenditures; it was planned and lasted only for one day; and as in all other cases, the strikers were sentenced to pay damages by the Labour Court.

To conclude, the public sector strikes described here have more in common than being solely carried out by female employees. They were all planned in advance and directed against cutbacks in public expenditures. With the exception of the social welfare secretaries’ strike, they differed from the simultaneous wildcat strikes in the private sector through their planning, in some cases even strike notices, the predetermined length of the action, and the political demands instead of, or in combination with, pay claims. Moreover, they never actually achieved anything: all strikes ended up in the Labour Court which sentenced a vast majority of the participants to pay damages. Yet there were no very sharp distinctions between the public-sector strikes of women workers and the female-dominated strikes in the private sector, as many of them had legal consequences too. The next section thus looks deeper into how the Labour Court handled women’s wildcat strikes.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 1987, no. 157.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 1989, no. 82.

## Women's wildcat strikes in the Labour Court

As wildcat strikes by definition violate the peace obligation, one might wonder why not all of them are brought before the Labour Court. The answer is that there is no public prosecutor in the field of labour legislation in Sweden; it is up to the labour market parties to take violations of collective agreements or labour law clauses to court, where they are represented; there are normally two representatives for employers' associations and two for trade unions which together with three non-partisan solicitors appointed by the government constitute the Labour Court. Consequently, it is the struck firm that decides whether a strike action should be a matter for legal interference or not. In the aftermath of the great miners' strike in 1969-1970, the SAF urged its affiliates to bring all unofficial actions before court. In the eyes of individual employers, however, it was usually better to keep good relations with the employees, and only 3 per cent of the wildcats were brought to court. The will to take a strike to court grew the longer the action was going on, but still only about 50 per cent of the strikes that lasted for more than a week went all the way to the Labour Court.<sup>43</sup>

In this light, the women-dominated strikes really stick out. As mentioned, only about 7 per cent of all unofficial strikes in Sweden 1975-79 were female-dominated. Yet, women's wildcats constituted roughly 25 per cent of all strikes that ended in the Labour Court. Why?

The public sector strikes we discussed in the previous section had a political target, which is likely one reason why they were brought before the court, even when they only lasted for a day. According to the Public Employment Act, which went into effect on 1 January 1977, industrial actions in the public sector may under no circumstances aim to "exert an influence on domestic political conditions".<sup>44</sup> An extra strong hostility from the employers was therefore not surprising. But the women's private sector wildcats were also met differently than men's. Most notably, three of the strikes presented above ended with firing. In Skövde 1974-75, ASAB fired two "strike leaders" directly, and later seven more cleaners; the sewers at Brason all lost their jobs in 1975; and so did the cleaners at Domnarvet ten years later. In the Domnarvet case the cleaners obtained redress from the Labour Court, but after a process so long that the redress was mostly symbolic. The Brason strike was never brought to court. The treatment of the ASAB case is, however, worth looking deeper into, not the least from a gender perspective.

### *Cleaning in court*

---

<sup>43</sup> THÖRNQVIST, Christer. *Arbetarna lämnar fabriken: Strejkrörelser i Sverige under efterkrigstiden, deras bakgrund, förlopp och följder*. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 261-64.

<sup>44</sup> The Public Employment Act (SFS 1994:260) 23§.

As mentioned above, two of the Skövde cleaners were fired for being strike leaders already on the second day of the strike. In its final ruling, the Labour Court, nonetheless, established that there was no legal ground for the dismissals; the two workers were protected by the Employment Security Act that just had been made effective. On the other hand, the court made no objections against ASAB's firing of the remaining strikers at the end of the conflict. The seven fired women and their legal representatives claimed that the strike had been maintained only because the first two dismissals violated the Employment Security Act; consequently their action should be considered legal. The Labour Court thought otherwise, though. As the legitimacy of the first two dismissals could be tried in court, going on with the wildcat was instead found aggravating: the strikers had meddled in a dispute over rights. The distinction between disputes over rights and disputes over interests is very sharp in Swedish labour legislation. Interfering in disputes over rights has always been strictly forbidden and was thus an even stronger violation of the Collective Agreement Act than an "ordinary" wildcat strike.<sup>45</sup>

It is further a standard part of the procedure for deciding the size of the damages that the strikes' legal representative pleads for adjustment due to some extenuating circumstances. Although they are rare, there are cases when the court has adjusted the sum downwards. When so it has been cases when the struck firm had violated or neglected its duty to negotiate, had behaved excessively provoking, had been hostile to trade union representatives or health and safety ombudsmen, or in other ways acted in a manner that could foment workplace dissatisfaction. In the Skövde case, a new, yet not successful, argument for adjustment was tried: the cleaners were low-paid, part-time employed, and accordingly a "weak" occupational group in general. The Labour Court has never, however, either before or after Skövde, taken any notice of general work standards. Yet, we have already seen one extenuatory circumstance in the ASAB conflict. In the ore fields, one of the cleaners notified the employer in writing before the strike that she did not dare to work because she was afraid to be harassed by the other workers. She therefore escaped all damages. On the other hand, women on sick-leave or on leave during the same strike were sentenced to pay damages. They had not made clear that they were willing to work if they had not been absent for other reasons; hence the court saw their leave as a way to hit against ASAB, but dodge the responsibility for it.<sup>46</sup>

It is worth noticing that when the Labour Court actually did find extenuating circumstances in some of the other women strikes we have analysed here, it was almost always related to the length of the strike. In the Domnarvet case of 1985-86, for example, some of the strikers were sentenced to pay twice the sum as the other participants, 300 SEK and 150 SEK respectively. The cleaners who got away the easiest were those who had returned to work before the strike was over.<sup>47</sup> The Labour Court described the seven Skövde cleaners as "extraordinary stubborn", since they maintained the strike for as long

---

<sup>45</sup> GÖRANSSON, Håkan. *Kollektivavtalet som fredspliktsinstrument: De grundläggande förbuden mot stridsåtgärder i historisk och internationell belysning*. Op. Cit., p. 343.

<sup>46</sup> *Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1975, no. 16.

<sup>47</sup> *Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1986 no. 20.

as 17 days, and had not obeyed a provisional decision by the court to return to work. Consequently, the court unanimously agreed that the dismissals did not violate the Employment Security Act. On the other hand, a majority of the court members stated that the firing of the two “strike leaders” on day two of the strike was illegal and they had therefore never got dismissed in the eyes of the law. The two representatives for the employers’ association in the court, however, registered reservations against this decision. The cleaners had been defective in loyalty and obedience, and since ASAB had lost its trust in them, the obvious consequence was to sack them.<sup>48</sup>

“Loyalty” was also on the agenda ten years later when the Labour Court found the dismissals of the Domnarvet cleaners illegal. By trying to return to work after being given notice of firing, the women had shown good intentions and loyalty to the company, and should thus be protected by the Employment Security Act, the court argued.<sup>49</sup> The fact that the Labour Court discussed “loyalty” at all in the Domnarvet verdict must be seen in the light of Skövde. The Skövde case had set a precedent: if a wildcat strike goes on without openings for several days, the firm has the right to fire the workers due to their lack of “loyalty”. Yet, although the 1974 Employment Security Act did not prevent companies from firing participants in wildcat strikes, all dismissals could now be tried in court. Before 1974 employers were in their sole right to “freely hire and fire”. That right did not disappear with the introduction of the Employment Security Act, but now they could be urged to at least give arguments. For instance, when was a “long” wildcat strike so long that the struck firm could claim lack of loyalty?

### **But what about gender?**

Drawing on the examples we saw in the previous section, we may conclude that participants in wildcat strikes had barely any chances at all to avoid legal punishment if the employer brought the strike to court. In most cases the punishment was just to pay damages of quite a symbolic magnitude, but – besides the stigma of being a “disloyal” person – strikers could actually lose their jobs if the strike went on for some time. Yet, justice is supposed to be blind: it should not make any difference between different kinds of strikers. Consequently justice should also be “gender-blind”.

But is it? First of all, is it possible to *regard* men and women equally, but not *talk* about them in the same way? In the written judgement from the ruling against the dry cleaners at IMA in Sundsvall, the Labour Court introduces men with title and surname, for instance, the local union branch’s “Chairman Höglin” and the “Ombudsmen Larsson, Ståhl and Gunnarsson”, while women are only introduced with their first and family names, for example, “Tyra Åsén”.<sup>50</sup> In the Skövde case, men got first names too besides their titles in the judgement, for example “Ombudsman Bo Svensson” and “District

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 1975, no. 31.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 1987, no. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1978, no. 19.

Superintendent Ingvar Eriksson”. Women were instead reduced to only first names in the description of the conflict. It was “Ragnild and Britt-Marie” who got fired on the second day of the strike, and it was “Doris *et alii*” who continued the strike.<sup>51</sup> In a preliminary inquiry to the trial, jointly undertaken by the employer’s and trade union’s representatives, the women were labelled as “the girls/lassies” (*flickorna*, in Swedish), as if they were disobedient schoolgirls. We have not found a single case where men have been called “the boys/lads” (*pojkar*) in the Labour Court or preparatory inquiries. Moreover, when pleading for adjustment of the damages, the women’s legal representatives appealed to the court members’ compassion, not to “fairness”: the cleaners were part-time employees with low salaries and so on, therefore their strike was excusable.<sup>52</sup>

The picture of the ASAB women as weak and helpless was further multiplied by media, in Skövde as well as in Borlänge and the ore fields. Newspapers found it acceptable that single women, in particular single mothers, were on strike, but what about the married ones? Could and should women already “provided for” by a husband really gain anything from a strike?<sup>53</sup> If we compare it with the overall strike pattern, wildcat strikes in male-dominated industries were by many accepted as a natural part of the so-called Swedish model in the two decades studied here. The central confederations, the SAF and the LO, both pointed out the wave of wildcats as a threat against the Swedish model. At the firm level, it was, nonetheless, usually more important to keep up good workplace relations; therefore wildcats were accepted as temporary outbursts that should be handled at the shop-floor level, not by the central associations or the Labour Court.<sup>54</sup> In other words, employers in general were more patient with “male” strikes than with women on strike; the latter violated a “tradition”. We have also seen three women’s strikes that ended with dismissals. During the whole period 1970–1990, only two strikes performed by male workers ended in firing, one in vehicle services in 1978 and one in concrete works in 1980.<sup>55</sup>

## Concluding discussion

So, finally, in what ways *did* women’s strikes differ from men’s during the 1970s and 1980s strike waves? First, male strikes in manufacturing were normally “offensive”,

---

<sup>51</sup>It might be added that the files with the judgement were stolen (!) from the Labour Court. The patronizing prose is thus reconstructed from different people’s minutes which, however, does not make the language less demeaning. JOHANSSON, P. O. and HELLMARK, Ann-Britt. *Från LKAB till ASAB: Strejker och lockout på den svenska arbetsmarknaden 1970–74*. *Op.Cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>52</sup>*Arbetsdomstolens domar* [Rulings of the Labour Court] 1975, no. 31. Despite the lack of success, the same argument was used ten years later, in the case of the Domnarvet cleaners versus ASAB in Borlänge. *Ibid.*, 1986, no. 20).

<sup>53</sup>JÄRHULT, Ragnar. *Nu eller aldrig! En bok om ”den nya strejkrörelsen”*. *Op. Cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>54</sup>THÖRNQVIST, Christer. *Arbetarna lämnar fabriken: Strejkrörelser i Sverige under efterkrigstiden, deras bakgrund, förlopp och följder*. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 297-99.

<sup>55</sup>THÖRNQVIST, Christer. ”Hur trivialiteter blir ideologi: Vilda strejker i arbetsdomstolen under 20 år”. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 52-53.



aiming to profit from wage drift by bringing pressure to bear on local wage negotiations. About three out of four strikes in all of Sweden during our period started in that way.<sup>56</sup> Yet, we barely find any women-dominated strikes of this kind. They were not totally absent, as we have discussed elsewhere,<sup>57</sup> but they only constituted a tiny minority. The only women's wildcat in manufacturing that lasted longer than just a few hours was the Brason sewers' strike, a primarily defensive strike with an extraordinary aftermath. Regarding length, strikes frequently have a better chance of success if they are short, if they hit hard from the outbreak and thus force the employer to make concessions before the strike gets "institutionalized". The longer a strike goes on, the more it saps organizational strength, both financially and "mentally".<sup>58</sup> Several strikes we have seen here failed on this point; in most of them the opposing positions immediately were deadlocked and the strikes then moved on without any openings until they ended up in the Labour Court. Women's strikes in the public sector, on the other hand, stuck out in the opposite direction; they were short, planned actions against political decisions to reduce public spending. Due to the political claims, however, they too ended up in the Labour Court.

But what do these obvious gender differences depend on? Maybe the strategy used by the striking women in the public sector tells us more than meets the eye. If so, what "meets the eye" should be taken rather literally: it is a matter of being seen. Despite their obvious failures, the striking women managed to draw public attention to both bad working conditions and the importance of their work. The same goes for other women's strikes discussed here, most notably the ASAB strikes, which shed public light on a low-valued job. As we hinted in the introduction, however, a pre-condition for any measures to make women's work seen is that it is in some respect "silenced". Men do not usually need to *make* their jobs visible. If men and women entered the labour market on equal terms, their conflict patterns would most likely not differ at all.

---

<sup>56</sup> THÖRNQVIST, Christer. *Arbetarna lämnar fabriken: Strejkrörelser i Sverige under efterkrigstiden, deras bakgrund, förlopp och följder*. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 143-45.

<sup>57</sup> FRANSSON, Susanne and THÖRNQVIST, Christer. "Gender-specific Strategies for Industrial Action: The Swedish Case in Historical Perspective". *Op. Cit.*, pp. 201-03.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. McCONNELL, Sheena. "Strikes, Wages, and Private Information". *American Economic Review*, 1989, vol. 79, no. 4.