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The End of the Swedish Model in Light of its Beginnings: On the Role of Engineering Employers and their Leaders

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Abstract

The central thesis of this paper is that the political ascendance and decline of Social Democracy in Sweden from the 1930's to the 1990's coincided with the establishment and breakdown of a tacit alliance between export-oriented big business, especially in engineering, and moderate factions of the Social Democratic Party, including the metalworkers' union. Terms of the alliance included patterns of pay distribution and managerial and investment control that in various ways clashed with the material and control interests of both unions and employers in a key home-market industry -- construction. This view, supported by unpublished archival sources, challenges previous historical research suggesting that engineering employers were, at least in the beginning, natural opponents of the Social Democrats, and home-market employers the primary beneficiaries.

Zusammenfassung


Diese Sichtweise, die von bisher unveröffentlichten Archivmaterialien gestützt wird, bedeutet eine Herausforderung früherer historischer Forschungen, die davon ausgegangen, daß Arbeitgeber in stark technologisch ausgerichteten Unternehmen zumindest zu Beginn quasi "natürliche" Opponenten der Sozialdemokraten waren und hauptsächliche Nutznieder die auf die heimischen Märkte ausgerichteten Arbeitgeber.
Changing power relations among capitalists have far reaching effects on relations between the capital and labor. In Sweden, therefore, the shifting balance of control inside the country’s powerful employers’ organization between export-oriented big business and sheltered, home-market, and often smaller businesses bear a close, but hitherto only dimly understood relationship with the ups and downs of Sweden’s extraordinary labor movement. In this paper, I will present some historical evidence to defend this point, arguing that Social Democrats have thrived in Sweden when they have joined forces with export capitalists in common efforts to govern the labor market. When on the other hand Social Democrats and their unions have applied their political and bargaining leverage over home-market employers to achieve things at the expense of big business in the sectors producing internationally traded goods, they set in motion institutional and political changes that do them great political and organizational damage.

This paper is devoted to demonstrating the idea that Social Democracy in Sweden has benefited from a tacit cross-class alliance with export capital. It does so by examining how the alliance formed during the initial phase of political ascendancy in the 1930’s. First, however, to confirm that this historical study is worth the effort, it will help to dwell a while on
recent changing organizational relations among employers and business's changing relations with the Swedish labor movement. What happened in the winter of 1990 inside the Swedish Employers' Confederation (Svenska Arbetsgivareföreningen, or SAF) was momentous in this regard, capping a series of changes that one might justifiably call the dismantling of the Swedish model of centrally engineered class compromise. This event, among others, suggest that the decline of Social Democracy involved conflict between export employers and the labor movement, just as its founding involved a rapprochement.¹

The Recent Crumbling of the Alliance. In 1990, SAF's weightiest affiliate, the Swedish Engineering Employers' Association (VF) forced SAF out of the business of negotiating wages with the union confederations at the centralized, national, multi-industry level.² Its frustration with the SAF leadership in centralized collective bargaining dated as far back as 1969, and caused VF to break away in 1983 and negotiate separately with blue-collar and white-collar unions. Exasperated once more by

¹ For a more detailed discussion, see Jonas Pontusson and Peter Swenson, "Markets, production, institutions, and politics: Why Swedish employers have abandoned the Swedish model," presented at the Eighth International Conference of Europeanists, Council for European Studies, Chicago, 1992.

² VF, dominated by Sweden's large transnational corporations in mechanical and electrical engineering (industrial machinery, autos, aerospace, power generation and transmission, telecommunications, consumer electronics, and other household durables, etc.), held fully one-third of the voting rights in SAF.
what SAF achieved in the 1989 central agreement outside the engineering sector with the private-sector, blue-collar Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), VF leaders finally forced SAF to dismantle its negotiation and statistics divisions, threatening to take VF out of SAF if they did not get their way. Evidently the idea of a SAF without a VF was disturbing enough that at least a majority supported an intact SAF with a disabled executive rather than a dismembered SAF with a strong executive. At the same time, VF succeeded in replacing the retiring SAF chairman, Olof Ljunggren, with one of its own men, Ulf Laurin. Laurin was committed to refusing to negotiate with LO, and thus to decentralizing collective bargaining to industry and even company levels.

Engineering employers in VF had for many years found their interests overlooked or even jeopardized by SAF's executive leadership, which was pushed in different directions by other employers in SAF and by both Social Democratic and Center-Right governments. Serious internal discontent developed in 1969. That year, public sector negotiations produced an early and unusually egalitarian settlement. LO's private sector unions pushed for a similar settlement, and SAF accommodated them, forcing upon VF a settlement that required engineering employers to compress their company wage structures. In following years, the egalitarian pressures continued to prevail as VF members' and officials' loud complaints fell on deaf ears in the SAF
leadership and its other affiliates. Though SAF officially endorsed VF’s view that employers in internationally traded goods sectors should be the "wage leaders", its actions showed otherwise. Most other employer groups, leery of strikes and lockouts, were easily softened by government mediators urging compromise. They then backed SAF leaders who hesitated to advocate the conflict measures necessary to drive through VF’s demands. The alliance of forces indifferent to VF’s concerns gave the metalworkers’ union the leverage to maintain contract terms affecting company pay structures that VF found intolerable in the long term.

Specifically, other employers in SAF were not prepared to go to battle for VF by joining the sympathy lockouts necessary to forcing more internal wage differentiation within firms on metalworkers. With the confrontational road blocked, VF took another approach in 1983 -- it simply bought the metalworkers’ union away from central negotiations with a relatively high increase, in order to turn the clock back on pay structure changes forced on them since 1969. The new leadership of the metalworkers, more sympathetic to the increasingly impatient demands of skilled workers than the earlier leadership, gladly accepted the deal. Things now seemed to be running more smoothly for VF in its relations with the union that in its separate relations with other employers.
VF’s problems with fellow employers in SAF did not stop there, however. VF could indeed disconnect itself institutionally with separate negotiations, but its member corporations could not isolate themselves from labor market pressures (intersectoral competition over labor) and sociological forces (intersectoral wage comparisons or wage rivalry) set in motion by rump-SAF negotiations. In particular, home-market employers, especially in the sheltered service sector in SAF, the very ones most reluctant to join VF in sympathy lockouts against LO, were forcing SAF into unacceptably high wage settlements that were especially costly at the low end of the pay scales. These private sector groups in SAF felt pressure to follow cues from public sector agreements, since they compete over the same labor, especially at entry level. Employers in VF, concerned about a shortage of good entry-level young workers for industry’s needs, then were subject to market pressures, as well as union pressures, to follow suit and elevate wages at the low end. To do so made keeping wage differentials high or even increasing them impossible or costly, given intense price competition in international markets.

VF therefore sought in 1990 to dismantle SAF as a central negotiating institution, to weaken (though it could not hope to eliminate) the indirect influence that public sector and home-market employers had over wage settlements in the internationally exposed engineering sector. If the public sector continued to
set the pace, especially at the low end of the Swedish pay structure, then at least decentralized, fragmented negotiations in the rest of the private sector outside engineering might mute or scatter the market pressures and wage rivalry penetrating into engineering. If bakeries alone, or newspaper publishers alone, or retail establishments alone, settled too high, perhaps not all home market sectors would not. These individual sectors, exercising considerable veto power, had proven capable of forcing everyone else up in centralized negotiations.

SAP's internal changes and retreat from centralized bargaining in 1990 were not isolated events -- isolated that is from changes in political strategy toward the labor movement in Sweden. The following winter, SAP's new role, now limited to information and consultation services to employers and their sectoral associations, political lobbying, and to outspokenly anti-social democratic use of the mass media, repudiated corporatist Sweden by surrendering its representation on most government boards and commissions. This event capped a fifteen year period of intense ideological and programmatic opposition to Swedish Social Democracy that took full steam after 1976. At that time, VF had flexed its muscles in internal SAF politics, improved its representation in internal decision making units, and promoted one of its forceful members, Curt Nicolin of ASEA, a world leader in production power generating equipment and other electrical engineering products, to the chairmanship. Unlike his
predecessor, Nicolin took an active role in leading SAF in a confrontational direction, taking the reins from Curt-Steffan Giesecke, the executive director, who resigned within two years.

For decades, until Nicolin's times, SAF had remained politically passive, except temporarily in the mid-1940's and mid-1950's when it mobilized in opposition to planning and centralized government control of pension funds. Its political dormancy resulted not from intimidation in the face of the left's electoral and organizational strength. In part it resulted from engineering's and other employer groups' contentment with Social Democratic willingness to abstain from encroaching on business's managerial and financial autonomy. But it also depended on what the Social Democratic government and its union confederation could provide in the way of labor market control -- including control over fellow employers as well as workers. Substantively, this meant that the Social Democrats and their unions, by and large, had to support, complement, and uphold VF's power and material interests against those of home market employers, sheltered from international competition, inside SAF.

VF joined most other employers in repudiating SAF's earlier political quiescence when the unions and Social Democrats began violating the old terms of the "compromise" between labor and capital -- i.e., when labor began using legislative power to promote "economic democracy" (labor control over production and
investment via statutory rights and state mandated, but gradual takeover of ownership). They also joined other employers against Social Democrats to halt the growth of public sector employment and strengthen the resolve of the state to control public workers’ wages. But the unity stopped there. Engineering employers went even further than most other employers wished to go by dismantling the centralized bargaining institutions that supposedly gave the Social Democratic labor movement enormous political and economic advantages. VF’s repudiation of SAF’s control and centralized bargaining resulted from its recognition that a new alliance of employer, union, and government forces had taken control of the centralized institutions. The new alliance violated the distributional, not control-related terms of the cross-class alliance between labor and capital. Hence the motive for dismantling centralization was independent of the political mobilization of SAF, and resulting from a shifting alliance of forces to the advantage of home market employers in SAF.

Social Democracy in Sweden, in other words, rested only in part on its own electoral strength and the Right’s political division. It also depended on the political quiescence of industry, and big, export-oriented industry in particular. It did not get that quiescence by intimidation or by fostering big business dependency on government patronage, contracts, and protectionist regulations. It also did not get quiescence by simply renouncing ambitions to assert control of industry from
above with state regulation of finance and investment and from below with worker or union control at the workplace.

One way of substantiating this argument would be to find evidence from what big business in Sweden said and did during the 1950's and 1960's, during Social Democracy’s heyday. There is considerable evidence available on the matter, but it will have to be presented in another context. This paper will present instead new historical evidence on the formative period of friendly relations between big business in the Swedish engineering industry and Social Democracy in the 1930's. The evidence is clear: The Swedish model of cross-class comity was founded on distributional and power terms forged in the industrial relations system and in legislative policy making that were favorable to export industry, and at the expense, in the power and autonomy, if not always material concerns, of home market industry. If that be so, it is not surprising that when Social Democrats and their unions began in the 1960's and 1970's to use their leverage over home market sectors, both public and private in order to violate export industry’s interests, that the 1980’s would become a period of intense big business opposition to Social Democracy and a resulting decline of its influence in

3 Other authors see home market employers as Social Democrats’ key allies and exporters as opponents. See Gösta Esping-Andersen and Roger Friedland, "Class coalitions in the making of West European economies." Political Power and Social Theory 3 (1982) and Gregg Olsen, "Labour mobilization and the strength of capital: The rise and stall of economic democracy in Sweden." Studies in Political Economy 34 (Spring 1991).
Swedish politics.

**Export Interests and Employer Leadership in the 1930’s**

The Swedish model of cross-class accommodation had many makers. Individual Social Democrats and trade unionists of course receive most attention. Few representatives of capital and the Right get much credit. What they did, and why they did it, is even less understood.

Historian Sven Anders Söderpalm is unusual for his efforts to show that Gustaf Söderlund, executive director of SAF from 1931 to 1939 (chairman between 1943 and 1945), was the most important figure, standing up to Swedish big business in his efforts to depoliticize SAF and make separate peace with the Social Democratic labor movement. There is no doubt true that Söderlund, a lawyer and conservative politician by background, not a businessman or industrialist, was a pragmatist strongly motivated by a desire to develop workable relations with the Swedish labor movement, especially to keep the insecure Social Democratic government (prodded from the Right) from intervening legislatively in regulating industrial organization and conflict. After acquiring a position in the powerful employers’ organization, he did much to bring such relations into being.

His independent influence on the course of events, however, has probably been overestimated, and the forces behind him unappreciated. Those forces were businessmen, with distinct interests deriving from their competitive relations in domestic and international markets.

By any measure, the most important man behind Söderlund was SAF chairman (1931-1942) J. Sigfrid Edström, who was instrumental in recruiting him. Without Edström, there may never have been a Söderlund on center stage, initiating negotiations toward the famous Basic Agreement of 1938 between SAF and LO at Saltsjöbaden. The Saltsjöbaden agreement brought organized capital and labor together into formal consensus on procedures for dispute resolution and for avoidance of "socially dangerous" conflicts. It also committed the unions to lay down some of their arms -- i.e., to abstain from use of various kinds of boycotts. It set the procedural stage for further centralized governance of industrial relations, including centralized wage bargaining at the national, multi-industry level begun during the war-time crisis and institutionalized in the 1950’s.

Employers wanted unions to stick to official strikes, which unions had to pay for with support from strike funds. Because such strikes are costly, union leaders think twice about using them. Cheaper tactics can inflict great damage with less cost. They can more easily be used to divide and rule employers, and are spared some of the harsh public glare that more visible strikes attract. Finally, they were very common in sectors like transportation where the employers’ could not counterattack with lockouts, a weapon that backfires violently by injuring large numbers of employers not directly involved in the dispute.
Behind Edström, in turn, stood the House of Wallenberg, a banking dynasty whose economic and political influence in Sweden equalled, coincided with, and outlasted that of the Morgan family in the U.S. In 1903, Marcus Wallenberg, who was establishing dominance in Sweden's engineering and forest product industries, had recruited Edström to head ASEA, a large electronics concern and later to become the "flagship" of Wallenberg's industrial fleet. ASEA's stature grew throughout the century to become in the 1990's, after merger with Switzerland's Brown Boveri, one of the top three giants in world production of power generation and transmission systems as well as other products like electric powered railroad locomotives. Edström ran ASEA as executive director until 1933, to take over the chairmanship in 1934 until his retirement in 1939.

Meanwhile, Edström held the chairmanship of Verkstadsföreningen (VF), the Swedish Engineering Employers' Association from 1916 until 1939. This association included, along with ASEA, such world-famous concerns as Separator (food processing and packaging machinery, now Alfa-Laval), SKF (ball bearings), LM Ericsson (telecommunications), Electrolux

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* Between 1911, when Marcus Wallenberg Sr. had Enskilda Banken sell off ASEA stock, and 1930, when Marcus Jr. bought up a large stake to foil GE's secret attempt to buy into ASEA, ownership in the company was dispersed, and control in the hands of Edström. In any event, throughout this period Enskilda Banken remained ASEA's main bank connection, and Marcus Sr. and Edström maintained their friendship. Jan Glete, Storforetag i starkstrom -- Ett svenkst industriforetags omvardsrelationer (Västerås: ASEA, 1984), pp. 60-1.
(household appliances), and AGA (natural gas works, equipment, and appliances). In 1905, Edström helped negotiate the country's very first centralized industry agreement with a union. Confident that he could work out relations of trust with the leadership of the Swedish Metalworkers' Union, Edström led the faction of VF leaders intent on negotiating with unions rather than smashing them. Active as a VF board member early on in its history, Edström tried unsuccessfully to bring VF into SAF, but was blocked by the current VF leadership. Shortly after Edström took over the VF chairmanship in 1916, however, he finally brought the engineering association into the confederation. From that point on he set about trying to assert control through his engineering association over the entire confederation. In 1926 he was chosen vice chairman; in 1931 he became chairman. Hence, at a formative moment in the making of the Swedish system of industrial relations, J. Sigfrid Edström sat astride the Swedish Employers' Confederation, the Engineering Employers' Association -- the most important industry association within the confederation -- and a leading firm within that association (period of overlap 1931-1939).

When Edström assumed the chairmanship of SAF in 1931, he took the position away from the aging Hjalmar von Sydow, who had lead SAF since 1907. Von Sydow had held both the chairmanship and the executive directorship between 1907 and October 1931. Specific circumstances and explicit motives surrounding this
shift in leadership are impossible to come by in publications, historical accounts of the organization, and easily accessible records. But from Edström’s own correspondence and papers we can piece together a plausible account. We can establish for example that some time in the Spring of 1929, Edström (as vice chairman of SAF) began maneuvering to get von Sydow out. The aged von Sydow (approaching seventy) was experiencing declining health, which apparently caused some concern. But this was probably not all. Unless it was von Sydow’s mental health, the concern was not enough to justify Edström’s calling a high-level meeting about the matter in 1929 without von Sydow present. The sketchy minutes suggest that von Sydow’s advice or views on the succession question did not merit discussion. Edström called another in August of 1930 while von Sydow was away on vacation, and then distributed a memorandum about the meeting to "all but v. Sydow".

One plausible reason, unrelated to age or health, for

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7 Edström’s authorized biographer says Edström began looking for a successor to von Sydow in 1931. K.A. Bratt, J. Sigfrid Edström — En levnadsteckning (typewritten manuscript, Edström papers, Riksarkivet Stockholm), Volume Chapter II, page 8. Edström may have forgotten, or have other reasons for neglecting to correct Bratt.


9 P.M. fran sammanträde i Stockholm den 6 maj 1929, Edström papers, Volume 34 (A14d); Edström to members of SAF’s board, 2 August, 1930, Edström papers Volume 34 (A14d). The words "to all but v. Sydow" were hand-written on Edström’s copy of the 1930 memo.
Edström's apparent dissatisfaction, was von Sydow's recent failure to appoint a representative of Edström's VF as one of the two employer-nominated judges in the newly created Labor Court (1928). Edström had written that VF "decidedly preferred" its own man because the Metalworkers' Union's Fritiof Ekman would be on the court. Von Sydow replied that he hated to have to turn down Edström's wish but that "personal qualifications" were more important than the size of the association in SAF. (Moreover, he added, tactlessly casting doubt on Edström's inside information, he had no knowledge of who would be appointed for the union side.) Edström quickly dashed off another letter saying if Ekman was not balanced "by an equally initiated employer representative he will school the government appointed members with a one-sided and false view of conditions in the engineering industry."

Metall has you know its special methods in its registers, lists, secret blockades, etc., conflict tactics that are fairly unknown in other industries. It is therefore likely that disputes of this nature will soon arise in the labor court and it is therefore quite necessary that there is real knowledge in the court from VF.  

Edström also met resistance from von Sydow in his attempts, in May of 1929, to get more leading figures from the export-oriented engineering and forest products industries industry, as well as the large banking interests, onto SAF's board. Edström's attempts to alter the balance of representation in favor of big

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10 Edström to Sydow, 2 November 1928. Edström papers, volume 34 (A14d).
business and closely related banking interests now coincided in time with the move to get rid of von Sydow. Von Sydow was resisting meanwhile, indicating that he "personally would gladly come to agreement with ... Edström", but felt compelled to give better representation to the smaller associations, most of which would have been from home market industries.  

Another telling conflict between Edström and von Sydow arose the following winter. Von Sydow prevailed once again, this time upon Edström's ASEA as well as the entire VF leadership, when he applied "particularly hard pressure" on the association to bring ASEA's elevator manufacturing and installation workers (who worked both away from and on construction sites) under the same contract and pay conditions enjoyed by electricians working under contract not with VF but with the association of Electrical Employers' Association. This association organized contractors in the building sector, a sheltered, home-market industry. ASEA's workers, previously paid according to VF-Metall contracts, would now have to be paid considerably higher. In unusually strong language, the VF leadership recorded in its minutes that it found the position it was forced into by von Sydow "particularly repugnant".

11 See Sydow to Christian Storjohann, 13 May, 1929; Edström to Wiking Johnsson, 22 May 1929; Wiking Johnsson to Edström, 23 May, 1929; and Edström to Johnsson, 25 May 1929. Edström papers, Volume 34 (A14d).

12 Minutes, VF board meeting, 24 February 1930. Verkstadsföreningens arkiv, Stockholm.
Von Sydow adopted his position in response to strike threats from electricians in the building trades who wanted to break into ASEA territory. He also appeared to side with the electrical contractors, voicing their concern that if ASEA and other engineering concerns continued to carry out installation work in buildings, they would be in a position to steal customers from building contractors. ASEA's raiding opportunities would be opened whenever the contractors' association was involved in disputes with electricians -- especially because it enjoyed the luxury of paying lower wages and therefore could offer attractive prices.\footnote{See Minutes, VF board meetings, 19 December 1929 (Sydow invited and present), and 24 February 1930.}

Insufficient sympathy for the interests and demands of big business, especially but not exclusively export-oriented engineering industry, seems therefore plausibly to have motivated Edström's campaign to remove von Sydow. It was Christian Storjohann of Billerud, a large forest products company active in international trade, who suggested Gustaf Söderlund to Edström as the man to replace von Sydow as SAF director. Storjohann had earlier been Edström's emissary to von Sydow on the matter of appointments to the SAF board discussed earlier. Edström had had Vilhelm Lundvik in mind, but Marcus Wallenberg "will probably want to keep him in the leadership of Industriförbundet (the
Swedish Federation of Industries). Looking for someone with a legal background and not an industrialist, probably in part to forestall opposition from opponents, Edström settled on Söderlund, but not before first checking with Wallenberg. To Wallenberg, Edström described the Conservative politician, Treasurer (finansborgarråd) of the Stockholm city government, as a "toujour man with a good negotiating manner." He requested that if Wallenberg did not know him personally, to consult with his "many friends." "It is very important, Edström wrote, "that he possess a sense of pragmatism and humor".

The question of pragmatism and humor, as well as "calmness and dignified bearing" indicates that Edström had more in mind than simply the engineering industry's interests as against other sectors. These character features were important because "he will be negotiating with workers," Edström wrote to contacts who knew Söderlund from Stockholm city government. According to a biography of Edström constructed largely from Edström's journals in 1952, Edström had praised von Sydow for always wanting to negotiate in good faith toward compromise, and even for "laying the foundation for harmony (samförstånd) in the labor market",


15 Edström to Wallenberg/Enskilda Banken, 20 June 1930, Edström papers, Volume 34 (A14d).

16 P.M. från sammanträde i Stockholm, den 6 Maj 1929. Edström papers, Volume 34 (A14d).
but suggests implicitly that SAF was hobbled by von Sydow's personal manner. Evidently, Von Sydow wittingly or unwittingly promoted public and union images of him as "the man with the lockout club" and "a representative of the aggressive side of employers; as the one who battled workers' organizations, and who raised resistance even to justified demands from workers."

Wanting to put a new face on SAF, Edström even went to surprising lengths, through discreet go-betweens, to sound out what Social Democratic politicians in Stockholm thought of Söderlund. What he found out was reassuring: Söderlund was "used to wrestling with sossarna (slang for Social Democrats)", and that even so, "the Social Democratic leadership in the city government value borgarrådet Söderlund highly."^

Once von Sydow left SAF ("not without some bitterness," according to Ivar Larson, von Sydow's assistant director") chairman Edström and director Söderlund steered away from von Sydow's old course. By 1928, von Sydow apparently had begun

17 K.A. Bratt, J. Sigfrid Edström. En levnadsteckning Part II, Chapter 8, p. 18.

18 Edström to General G.R.J. Åkerman, 20 June 1930; Hugo Hammar to Edström, 21 June 1930; Edström to Ragnar Blomquist, 9 July 1930; Edström to Åkerman, 10 July 1930; Edström to Hammar, 11 July 1930; Åkerman to Edström, 13 July 1930; Edström to Blomquist, 28 July 1930; Edström to Åkerman, 26 August, 1930 in Edström papers, Volume 34 (A14d).

19 Ivar O. Larson to Axel Palmgren, 10 August 1931. Axel Palmgren papers, Volume 12, Åbo Akademis Bibliotek, Åbo Finland. Larson was von Sydow's assistant director since 1918, and was to remain SAF's assistant director until 1947. Larson's letters to Palmgren betray a clear hostility toward Edström.
losing faith in SAF's capacity, using the multi-industry lockout, to impose order on the labor market, especially because of LO's growing membership and therefore pool for monetary support of workers locked out by SAF employers. Instead, as an important Conservative Party figure, he continued agitating for help from the state, in the form of restrictive labor legislation, to alter the balance in employers' favor. Edström and Söderlund, it would turn out, chose the exact opposite strategy: lockouts to establish a strong position from which then to negotiate a favorable central agreement (the Basic Agreement of 1938) as a surrogate for legislation.

Therefore Edström, not von Sydow, should have been depicted as "the man with the lockout club," though he too shared doubts about its costs and what it could accomplish. In any event, in an informal 1932 meeting of leading industrialists he convened, Edström gathered a largely affirmative response to his view that strong solidarity (in other words, multi-industry lockouts) remained the most important weapon for taming the militant unions, especially in the construction industry. Nobody liked the idea of legislation to institute compulsory arbitration, though some called for legal restrictions against strike referenda, since union members frequently rejected contract

proposals their more prudent leaders found acceptable.\(^2\)

Shortly thereafter, Söderlund, who was present at the meeting, fulfilled Edström’s highest expectations of "will and energy" in facing down the construction workers in the ten-month strike and lockout of 1933.\(^2\)

After the successful "clean up" of the construction industry’s wage levels and wage setting practices, Söderlund wrote jubilantly to Edström:

> For my part I have the decided opinion that all of us in SAF who participated in the work toward the solution of the construction conflict can feel mutual gratitude for the preliminary result that was reached. I believe that the gathering of our forces around the goal of cleaning up (sanering) the building industry, which we succeeded in doing, should possess the greatest significance for solidarity in our organization and for our future policies. We can be equally happy about that.

Then, in a hand-written Postscript:

> Have you seen D.N.’s (a prominent daily newspaper) leader column yesterday? It acknowledges that SAF’s lockout threat played a significant role in achieving the result. Developments, quite surely, point now to lockout measures being judged by most differently than we had reason to fear at an earlier stage.\(^3\)

Had von Sydow remained, or played a decisive role in picking his successor, would a happy outcome from Edström’s point of view been likely or possible? Social Democrats’ goodwill toward Söderlund (and Edström, as we shall see), may have made a big

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\(^2\) Anteckningar från sammanträde på Operakällarens entrésolvåning, fredagen 22 april 1932. Edström papers, Volume 34 (A14d).

\(^3\) Bratt, J. Sigfrid Edström, Volume II, Chapter 8, p. 20.
difference in ensuring that the government ultimately threw its weight against the construction workers rather than against SAF. Von Sydow (or a hand-picked successor) would likely have done worse from Edström's standpoint, in one of two alternative ways. He may have started off in a less confrontational manner because of his disenchantment with lockouts and because (as in the case of ASEA's elevator electricians versus building electricians and their employers), he showed less sympathy for the engineering industry's problems with labor conditions in the building sector. On the other hand, had he initially set off on a confrontational course, his Teutonic manner and reputation of belligerence might have precipitated the exact opposite reaction from the Social Democrats than did Edström's and Söderlund's bold but calculated defiance of Hansson did.

24 After SAF boldly rejected the Per-Albin Hansson's own proposal for a settlement, Edström telephoned the Social Prime Minister Hansson to inform him of SAF's decision to call a multi-industry lockout to break the construction union's strike and impose more favorable terms than either the usual mediation commission or Hansson proposed. Instead of imposing his solution, Hansson then used the government's influence "to get LO to pressure the recalcitrant carpenter and bricklayers' unions to give up their resistance." Bratt, J. Sigfrid Edström, Volume II, Chapter 8, pp. 23-24.

While Edström and Söderlund mobilized SAF as a powerful weapon in support of construction employers, it is important to regard the event as a significant victory for export-oriented big business as well. These employers had long found the militancy and high wages in construction (and the softness of construction employers) an irritant: construction workers' wages and demands were used as a reference for manufacturing industry workers' own demands; they led to high rents, and therefore high wage demands in manufacturing; they contributed to high costs and delays for investment in manufacturing facilities; they made it expensive to build housing to attract labor to manufacturing locations; and they sometimes attracted labor away from manufacturing when it was critically needed.

Note however that SAF's assertion of control in the conflict also represented a distinct loss of control for small employers in the home-market construction sector. They were henceforth, to an degree experienced by no other industry, put under the tutelage and control of a multi-industry association. To a considerable extent, construction employers submitted gladly as a group, even supporting the idea of a SAF functionary being hired to monitor individual construction employers' labor policies on a permanent basis -- because maintaining employer solidarity on their own had proved so difficult.

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26 Minutes, SAF board meeting, 31 May, 1934. Svenska Arbetsgivareföreningens arkiv, Stockholm.
Edström's SAF did not assert this kind of control frictionlessly however, for dramatic resignations and expulsions ensued among construction employer leaders. During the construction conflict, SAF and a majority of leaders of the Construction Industry Association (Byggnadsindustriförbundet, or BIF) exempted Skånsk Cementgjuteriet from the lockout order for a hospital renovation project in Oskarshamn in southern Sweden, in order to maintain public sympathy for the lockout. Skånsk Cementgjuteriet was the biggest general contractor in Sweden, set up by the huge Skånsk Cement, Sweden's biggest manufacturer (and exporter) of building materials based in Malmö. This was the last straw for Nils Dahlqvist of Malmö, leader of BIF, who had "an old grudge" (gammalt groll) with the big company and who feared reactions from smaller members of his association. Some of these small employers no doubt would have been glad to end the conflict on terms unacceptable to Edström and start building and earning again. Dahlqvist quickly resigned his chairmanship of BIF (which he had held since 1918) along with his seat on SAF's board.

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27 On the conflict between SAF and Dahlqvist recounted here see Söderlund to Edström, 17 October 1933, Edström papers, Volume 34 (A14d); Minutes, SAF board meeting, 20 October 1933; Söderlund to Edström, 21 October 1933, Edström papers Volume 34 (A14d); Minutes, SAF board meeting, 24 November 1933; Söderlund to Edström, 23 March 1937, Edström papers, Volume 35 (A14e).

28 Dahlqvist had also appeared frustrated with the SAF leadership's handling of other aspects of the conflict, especially its refusal to force SAF-affiliated plumbing contractors -- who were free to proceed with their work -- into the lockout. Minutes, SAF board meeting, 26 May 1933.
Later, in 1935, Dahlqvist's Malmö-based affiliate was expelled from BIF (and therefore SAF) for failure to bring its by-laws into line with BIF's statutes, which simultaneously were being adjusted to meet SAF's strictures. Some 20 Malmö builders, especially the larger ones, bolted to form a new Malmö association, and were then readmitted into BIF and SAF. Skånska Cementgjuteriet (responsible for the Oskarshamn hospital project) was one of the SAF loyalists, who together in 1937 did about 37% of all work in Malmö. To add insult to injury, members of Dahlqvist's recalcitrant association lost all lucrative future work under contract from Edström's ASEA and probably other large manufacturers -- dooming their association no doubt to marginality.

Edström and Söderlund, after effectively asserting the interests and control of big, export-oriented manufacturing interests in the construction conflict, also changed course on the labor law question, one of von Sydow's pet projects. A few years after the 1933 building trades conflict, Edström chaired negotiations initiated by Albert Forslund of LO and Söderlund to produce a national procedural agreement as an alternative to, and to pre-empt, legislation being pushed on the Social Democrats,

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29 Thor Brunius, Svenska Byggnadsindustriförbundet 25 år (Stockholm: BIF, 1944), pp. 77-79.
especially by its coalition partner, the Farmers' Party.\textsuperscript{30} Von Sydow by contrast with Edström had long been a leading champion of labor legislation, which except for the 1928 law on collective contracts which made contract violations actionable and set up the labor court to adjudicate, never came to pass. Conservative and centrist parties in Sweden were too divided on the matter. VF (and probably Edström) warmly supported the 1928 legislation, and had high expectations of it for enforcing contracts.\textsuperscript{31} But Edström was on the cautious side regarding legislative as opposed to contractual restrictions on strike, lockout, and boycott tactics after contracts expired, fearing it could cost employers as well as unions dearly. To be precise, one thing Edström feared were restrictions on the use of the multi-industry sympathy lockout. Edström was fully familiar with how neighboring Norwegian employers' were saddled with legislative restrictions on the lockout by their supposed allies in conservative parties.\textsuperscript{32} Compulsory arbitration of the Danish

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Hansson and his Minister of Social Affairs, with responsibility for labor matters, doubted chances of their success, according to Forslund and Söderlund. Bratt, \textit{J. Sigfrid Edström}, Volume III, Chapter 15, p. 14.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Georg Styrman (VF's executive director) to Edström, 28 February 1928. Edström papers, Volume 25 (A3e/styrelsen).
  
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Norwegian employers -- unlike Swedish ones -- could not join in multi-firm, multi-industry sympathy lockouts before expiration of their contracts. Edström, "Arbetsfredens fullgörande," dated 15 February 1926, in Edström papers, Volume 25 (A3e/styrelsen).
\end{itemize}
variety was also on the agenda, and equally unwanted.\textsuperscript{33}

Much can be, and has been, written about the 1938 agreement, and need not be repeated here. A few comments about overlooked issues are worth examining, however, in light of Edström's and the engineering industry's role in the leadership change. First, LO agreed to much in the agreement, but received little except a reprieve from Social Democratic government threats of legal regulation of union affairs and labor-management affairs. By signing the agreement, the unions de facto endorsed both employers' individual managerial prerogatives and their collective right to conduct multi-industry sympathy lockouts. The unions' one major breakthrough -- and about the most controversial element in the agreement, which was regarded by some but not all employers as a major violation of the principle of managerial sovereignty -- was a one-week notice period before layoffs for workers with one year's employment.\textsuperscript{34}

Handing over a tiny piece of managerial freedom in this way could hardly have cost Edström and other big industrialists, it would seem. By 1938, big firms in engineering were experiencing

\textsuperscript{33} Anteckningar från sammanträde på Operakällarens entrésolvåning, fredagen den 22 april 1932. Edström papers, Volume 34 (A14d).

renewed labor shortages, and the "concession" on layoffs would have cost very little for the purchase of LO's formal acceptance of the mass lockout and general managerial prerogatives in addition to a reprieve from unwanted legislative intervention in the labor market. In fact, Edström and other big firms (in the so-called "Directors' Club") in the engineering industry initiated the very same idea to fellow industrialists two years earlier in December of 1936 as an intermediate solution to workers' problems with cyclical unemployment! In other words, at the same time Edström was floating the idea to fellow businessmen as something to be studied by a proposed research and propaganda institute favoring industry, Edström was chairing SAF-LO negotiations in Saltsjöbaden toward the Basic Agreement of 1938 -- which would produce the same idea as a major concession to the unions. Edström's role in floating this idea as part of his effort to set up a research and publicity institute that influential historical research regards as deeply hostile to the governing Social Democratic party is worth examining now.

Edström wanted to work with the unions -- but did he want to work

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35 The more profound one being better planning and coordination of industrial capacity expansion -- but without the state involved. This suggestion came with a number of others in a motion to the Swedish Federation of Industry proposing to establish a research and propaganda institute which could counteract the Social Democrats' new electoral and intellectual headway in Swedish politics and economic debate. P.M. ångående utredning om vissa social-industriella problem m.m. 18 December 1936. Edström 36 (1/A2. Sveriges Industriförbund). Also reprinted and discussed in Rolf G.H. Henriksson, Som Edström ville -- hur TUI blev till (Stockholm: Industrins Utredningsinstitut, 1990), pp. 31-34; 201-04.
with their political party? The answer, I believe, is yes.

Edström, SAF, and the Social Democrats

Having captured a good deal of power in the SAF hierarchy on behalf of export-oriented big business, Edström helped use the organization’s influence in the 1930’s and beyond over other employers to forge and solidify a tacit, if at times rocky, cross-class alliance with conservative Social Democrats and their allies in the labor confederation, LO. Distributional and regulatory policies of the dominant factions within the Left, embodied in both collective bargaining and corporate taxation, especially favored the dynamic and profitable export-oriented industry. These policies came at the expense of other sectors like construction, where workers lost materially in relative wages, and builders were subjected to extensive control from both the employers’ confederation and the state. The engineering, paper, and forest products industries, as well as banking, by contrast, were spared practically all intrusive regulation or even takeover advocated by radicals within the Social Democratic Party.

To characterize Edström as a figure at the center of this tacit cross-class coalition is to challenge historian Sven Anders Söderpalm’s influential depiction of him and fellow big
industrialists in VF as Social Democracy's nemesis, at least in the early years of Social Democratic rule. To Söderpalm, Gustaf Söderlund (whom Edström hired) personified the decisive conciliatory, accommodating figure, while Edström personified the antagonist to be overruled by employer moderates rather more intimidated by the prospect of long-term Social Democratic rule, or more eager for Social Democratic governmental favors. Söderpalm attaches importance to the fact that Edström was away on vacation when Söderlund and Forslund of LO took the initiative to work out a mutually satisfactory alternative to labor legislation on the Social Democratic agenda — as if Edström had never shown his preference for such a solution. In fact, the spirit of Saltsjöbaden was every bit the spirit of accommodation that had brought steadily improving relations between the metalworkers' union and VF; Edström had a hand in this process, and no doubt wished it to spread to the entire labor market.

Söderpalm bases his depiction of Edström in part on the fact that Edström founded the "Directors' Club" in the Spring of 1933, an elite group executives of five export-oriented firms in the engineering industry (ASEA, Electrolux, LM Ericsson, Separator,


37 And as if, even as chairman of the negotiations, would not have been able to sabotage its progress had he wanted to. Söderpalm of course knew that Edström chaired the negotiations at Saltsjöbaden, but seems to imply he only played a passive or perhaps indifferent role.
and SKF; AGA joined in 1941). Nicknamed "The Big Five" (in English), the Directors' Club originally formed in 1933 to coordinate international export and sales strategies in the harsh protectionist climate of the time. But, according to Söderpalm, "its activity soon took on a more political character", which involved among other things coordination of industry contributions to conservative parties, preparing policy platforms for them, and founding a research and propaganda institute to assert Swedish industry's interests in the legislative and electoral process.

Why did the Directors' Club become politicized? The reason, according to Söderpalm was Social Democratic economic policy, which supposedly favored home-market industry at the expense of exports:

The members had their special trade policy interests and were, like other big export industries, natural (givna) opponents to the new crisis and unemployment policies. They drove up costs for exports with agricultural supports and wage increases, and felt all the more threatening, as those fully counteracted (öervann) the effects of the depression; the pulp and engineering industries contributed strongly to the cyclical upswing and increased export volume by 40 to 50 percent, but the home-market industries that were supported by extensive building activity grew at a faster pace than exports.³⁸

There are some problems with this rather confusing and equivocal assessment of the effects of the Social Democrats' domestic economic policies and their implications for explaining

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³⁸ Söderpalm, Direktörsklubben, p. 19.
the Directors' Club’s political activity. Minutes from the Big Five meetings reveal hardly a trace of interest, much less worry, about the agricultural and building policies of the Social Democratic-Farmer coalition. After all, the association’s political discussions started up practically a year after the Social Democrats came to power. It is true that its discussions of political agitation began only a month after the Farmers’ party finally agreed to housing projects for workers in exchange for protectionism and price supports for farmers. But this delay had been ended by SAF’s (and Edström’s) lockout pressures on the Social Democrats and LO to bring construction unions to order. Success with that confrontational tactic then made it possible for the Farmers’ Party to accept the crisis agreement. (The Farmers’ Party insisted that the conflict had to end in an acceptable way.)

The result of the combined pressure from SAF, the Farmers’ Party, the Social Democrats, and LO was to reduce wages, not increase them. Employers in VF expected reduced wages and a reformed wage setting system in construction to have a calming effect on wage trends and other indirect costs for exporters. In

Söderpalm does cite some evidence that SAF, Wallenberg, ASEA, and others were anxious about the costs of Social Democrats’ crisis plans for export industry (Direktörsklubben, p. 184, note 1), dated 1 April 1933. But it was not until the 24th of April, one year later, that the issue of political action was taken up, after the crisis agreement with the Farmers’ Party was signed. Direktörsklubbens arkiv, 24 April 1934. Why would Edström have waited so long?
fact, VF employers were not even particularly worried at the time about high wage costs, in part because of a large devaluation in 1931 that brought effective wage costs down even below France's. If anything, it was the 1931 devaluation, not Social Democratic wage or agricultural policies, that was increasing exporters' costs (for imported raw materials and semifinished goods) -- and the devaluation was not the Social Democrats' doing.

Söderpalm does not cite any direct evidence for his conclusion that the Directors' Club's political activity was motivated by its need to counteract the home-market friendly policies of the Social Democrats, or that Edström was in any way more hostile to the farmer-labor coalition (and its supposed favoritism to home-market sectors) than was SAF-director Söderlund, who supposedly differed with Edström regarding accommodation with the Social Democrats. While Edström was

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40 Minutes, VF board meetings, 8 September 1932 and 7 September 1933, Verkstadsföreningens arkiv, Stockholm. See also Minutes, Directors' Club, 21 June, 1933, Direktörsklubbens arkiv, Riksarkivet, Stockholm.

41 On the devaluation's cost effects, see Ingemar Gerhard, Problem rörande Sveriges utrikeshandel 1936/38 (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri, 1948), pp.61-62 and Erik Ambjörn, Svenskt importberöende 1926-1956 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1959), p. 36. These are two works Söderpalm cites to support his contention about Social Democratic policies' costs for exporters; evidence for his contention in these books is hard to find.

42 See for example the first paragraph on p. 21 in Direktörsklubben. The footnote for the paragraph cites nothing from the Directors' Club's meetings or papers. In fact of all unlikely people it mentions Söderlund supporting Wallenberg
devoted to advancing ASEA's position in the world marketplace, ASEA itself was not in the slightest wounded by conditions favoring growth of the home market: as ASEA's sales from 1933 to 1939 more than doubled in international markets, its production for the home market, due in part to orders from the government-owned railroads, even grew slightly faster."

According to Edström himself, it was Social Democratic Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson of all people who inspired Edström to take up the matter of organizing industry to assert itself politically. Visiting the Riksdag one day in the Spring of 1934 about a matter concerning ASEA, Edström dropped in on the Prime Minister, and recalled the following:

> When I was leaving the room he called me back, asked me to sit down to continue our conversation. To my surprise the Prime Minister expressed the opinion that industry ought to be better represented in the Riksdag. Jokingly I answered: 'Can you give me some votes so that we get a Riksdagsman

against support for agriculture and for aid to export industry. Söderlund, in private correspondence with Finnish politician and employer leader Axel Palmgren, referred to the coalition between Social Democrats and the Farmers' Party as an "unholy alliance" (Söderlund to Palmgren, 22 December 1933, Volume 13), and regarded its crisis agreement as a "sad" (sorgligt) example of "cow trading" (logrolling) (11 January 1935, Volume 14), which was depressing (sorglustigt) to witness (22 April 1937, Volume 15). Palmgren papers, Åbo Akademins Bibliotek.

"In the late 1920's, slightly over 50% of ASEA's production was sold abroad; in the next decade, after the dramatic loss of export markets in 1930, exports accounted for only 25-30%. Jan Glete, ASEA under hundra år 1883-1983. En studie i ett storföretags organisatoriska, tekniska och ekonomiska utveckling (Västerås: ASEA, 1983), pp. 104-05 and 132-3.
in?' P. A. smiled! One can't get far that way, he said, but one can imagine other ways around it (andra utvägar). I promised to think about the matter."

This was, according to Edström, the first impulse behind discussions in the Directors' Club that led to the founding of the IUI, or Industriins Utredningsinstitut (Institute for Industrial Research), which Edström brought into being for the sake of research and, against Söderlund’s resistance, use of the mass media and political pressure on the Riksdag on behalf of the economic and political interests of Swedish industry. SAF director Söderlund, apparently, differed earnestly with Edström on the matter of using the institute to challenge the Left openly in public debate.

Edström’s 1936 proposal, mentioned above, for a two-weeks notice for layoffs, was the third of the seven policy initiatives that Edström and the Directors’ Club had in mind for the IUI to study. Later presented in 1938 as a concession to the union confederation, it could hardly be considered the product of big export business’s belligerent frame of mind. Also addressed in Edström’s seven-point document were

(1) the need to enlighten the public on the job-creating effects of rationalizing production;

"Bratt, J. Sigfrid Edström, Volume II, Chapter 9, p. 9. Aware that Edström’s little conversation with Hansson took place, historian Soderpalm glances over it, apparently attaching little significance to it and what Edström said about it afterwards. Direktörsklubben, p. 19."
(2) the need for industry to soften the blows of plant shutdowns and consolidation of production with severance pay and the like;

(4) the requirement that company pensions should not reduce state pensions and vice versa;

(5) the requirement that tax law should accommodate the creation of company funds for severance pay and pensions;

(6) the need for tax provisions fostering investment;

(7) the need for industry to coordinate efforts to fight government planning.

Only the seventh and last point regarding opposition to state "control, subvention, and monopoly" can be construed as anti-Social Democratic. It did not conflict in principle however with the ambitions of Hansson's moderate wing. No mention appears of the Social Democrats' crisis program and its costs for export manufacturers.45

If anyone in the Directors' Club was a radical opponent to the Social Democrats, it was Sven Erik Österberg, the group's executive director, a free-trader and right-wing founder of the liberal party, Folkpartiet. A full-time politician, Österberg was not an industrialist himself. Edström recruited Österberg (possibly at the recommendation of Björn Prytz of SKF), who started as full time executive in April of 1935. Edström claims to have admired Österberg's energetic research efforts on the

Directors' Club's behalf, but ultimately came to feel he had to be kept on a short leash. "He shouldn't be let loose", Edström wrote in his diary in 1940."

For this reason, Söderpalm should probably have regarded Edström's globetrotting tour from 13 September of 1935 through 28 March 1936 as more risky for having given free reign to Österberg (the loose cannon) rather than to Söderlund (the peacemaker on the loose). While Edström was away, the Directors' Club commissioned Österberg on the 26th of September to consult with conservative politicians and draft some material intended to provide the basis for a common political program for the conservative and liberal parties in the upcoming elections." In one most remarkable installment, finished in mid-November, Österberg strongly advocated among other things legislative control of industrial relations, including state-mandated compulsory membership in economic associations.

For my own part, I have come to the conclusion that such a solution to the matter (compulsory affiliation), which surely in all probability will eventually be forced by developments, would from various standpoints be the most useful for society."
It may well have statements like this one that gave rise to Edström's subsequent opinion of Österberg as a loose cannon, for Edström in all probability did not share such "corporatist" views."

Ensuing discussions in the Directors' Club, with fellow right-wing politicians invited to join the industrialists in discussion on 20 December 1935, did not generate much enthusiasm from the politicians, even according to Söderpalm, for Österberg's platform ideas. Edström was not present. The industrialists present, except for the only politician among them (the liberal Björn Prytz from SKF, who chaired the meeting in

"Edström leaves no record behind of wanting the state to compel or coerce affiliation. Quite the contrary. On corporatism generally, for example, he regarded Gerard Swope's and Franklin Roosevelt's NRA as a dangerous precedent for the rest of the world. (But perhaps his view on NRA was colored by Swope's foiled efforts on behalf of General Electric in 1929 to purchase a large stake in ASEA, part of a strategy to acquire 25% of all major European electrical engineering companies. With the help of Wallenberg ASEA fended off GE.) On compulsory membership, specifically, he in fact saw worrisome consequences of bringing all small metalworking firms into VF, yet understood the problems of dealing with construction workers arising from the existence of many unorganized employers. He personally promoted autonomous efforts to bring large employers into SAF. During the Saltsjöbaden negotiations he came to the conclusion that total inclusion was necessary, and prodded Soderlund to think about ways SAF could promote it on its own -- without state help. On the NRA, see Edström to Söderlund, 9 August 1933, Edström papers, Volume 34 (A14d); on small metalworking firms, see Edström to Hugo Hammar, 18 August 1933, Edström papers, Volume 28 (A3h/styrelsen m.m.); on bringing big firms into SAF see Edström to Söderlund, 13 September, 1937, Edström papers, Volume 35 (A14e); and on SAF's efforts, see Edström to Söderlund, 13 September 1937, Edström papers, Volume 35 (A14e). On GE and ASEA, see Glete, ASEA under hundra År, pp. 99-101.
Edström's absence), appeared to be silent according to the sketchy minutes. This silence (along with Edström's absence) calls into question Söderpalm's judgement that the result was a "setback" (bakslag) for the Directors' Club, rather than politicians Österberg and Prytz alone.

While Österberg helped bring the IUI into being, he failed completely in accomplishing it on terms he liked, and his name was apparently never openly proposed for its directorship. When Edström moved in Söderlund's direction in 1938, accepting the idea of making the IUI less of a propaganda and platform drafting machine against the Left (as Österberg wanted) and more of an academic research institute with some informational and educative functions, historian Henriksson speculates that Österberg probably felt somewhat betrayed and bitter.

In sum, Söderpalm leaves a rather false impression of Edström, his differences with Söderlund, and his political orientation toward the Social Democrats. Only by equating or confusing Edström with the Directors' Club, and the Directors' Club with Österberg, is Söderpalm able to support a picture of the big engineering employers as "natural" opponents of the Social Democrats and vigorous supporters of restrictive labor

50 Direktörsklubben, p. 37.

51 Henriksson, Som Edström ville, pp. 75. See also pp. 52 and 83.
legislation. Edström in fact did not seem to find Social Democrats worth expensive opposition. By 1941, the Social Democratic leadership had so proved its merit that Edström decided to cut off financial life support to numerous conservative newspapers unable to cover their costs. In response to one such cry for help, Edström wrote

I must say that I am despondent (fortvivlad) about these badly managed conservative newspapers that we are always supposed to aid. In my own company we have ceased with this. If the conservative press cannot run on its own steam, then may it die. For that matter the sossar (Social Democrats) are becoming conservatives themselves.22

One must not draw from this the hasty conclusion that Edström truly wished to see the conservative press die; his remarks were made, after all, in a moment of exasperation. In fact, as SAF chairman Edström was presently at work organizing the secret channeling of SAF money to Näringslivets Fond, whose purpose was to use its financial leverage to consolidate, rationalize, and economically revitalize the conservative press -- but according to Edström's records, not to radicalize it. Edström was also no opponent of using the Directors' Club as a forum for eliciting and coordinating big industry support for the liberal and conservative parties.

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52 Fritiof Söderback to Edström, 11 June 1941, and Edström to Söderback, 12 June 1941, Edström papers, Volume 35 (A14e).
The Terms of the Cross-Class Alliance

To argue that Edström was engaged in building a tacit alliance with the unions and Social Democrats does not mean that he would have reason to cut off his support for the right. On the contrary, Edström no doubt understood the importance of maintaining a strong conservative presence influenced by big business interests in Swedish politics in order to keep the Social Democrats within the bounds of the acceptable and to the terms of the alliance. This meant, of course, that conservative Social Democrats would have to keep the left wing under control, and abandon overblown ambitions to socialize and regulate industry. Edström probably understood his role in helping the moderate Social Democrats by mobilizing industry in politics whenever necessary. In this regard, historian Söderpalm’s depiction of Edström and the Directors’ Club as unyielding opponents of the Social Democrats, whenever they shifted in a radical direction, is entirely correct. By the late 1930’s, and through the war, when Edström was reigning in Österberg, the Social Democratic government showed only moderate intentions. In response however to the Social Democrats’ radical Post-war Program, big industry, with the Directors’ Club and Edström unreservedly behind it, adopted a new and strident oppositional posture, with apparently good effect. The Social Democrats backed down, and returned to their more moderate course in advancing new social policy, macro-economic management, and
Edström no doubt understood that a strong right, effectively articulating big industry's arguments against intrusive state ownership and regulation, could strengthen and embolden the moderate Social Democrats when activity on the left flank got overambitious. This may have been the same logic Per Albin Hansson had in mind, and if he did, it is no surprise that he should have expressed to Edström personally an interest in industry gaining a strong political voice, be it inside or outside the Riksdag.

**Distribution and control.** The tacit cross-class alliance between moderate Social Democrats, and the worker and employer groups dominating in SAF and LO, revolved around two issues. The first issue was government control over managerial practices and investment strategies in manufacturing industry, especially engineering and other export-oriented sectors. The second concerned distribution of costs and benefits under the Social Democrats' and their unions' control to different sectors of the economy.

First, in the matter of managerial control in industrial relations, the Social Democrats sided with the views of Edström and Söderlund by supporting mutual self-regulation over legislation to govern relations in the labor market. SAF and LO
took the matter of controlling the construction sector in their own hands, while practically nothing changed in export industry, even as regards notice periods before layoffs, where many big firms already had such policies. In terms of control, both construction employers and unions lost autonomy to peak organizations, whose role in governance was backed by private industry and the Social Democrats. Home market employers generally, not just builders, had to submit to an employer confederation dominated by exporters. At the onset of centralized war-time control of wage negotiations it was home-market employers who complained most about SAF’s control over their negotiations and their subordination in SAF decision making. In an unusual move, SAF even rejected a preliminary contract negotiated by brewery employers, forcing them back to the bargaining table.\footnote{See W. de Sharengrad to Edström, 11 December 1939, and accompanying P.M. angående avtalsförhandlingarnas centralisering, dated 11 December 1939, Edström papers, Volume 35 (A14e). On the brewery negotiations, see Minutes, SAF board of directors, 26 September, 1939.}

Also, in the matter of government control of industrial investment and pricing practices, the Social Democrats lowered their ambitions entirely, particularly over Sweden’s dynamic export sectors. Vigorous opposition from big business, well recounted by Söderpalm, helps explain the retreat. Control of industry would henceforth not go very far beyond Keynesian macro-
economic manipulation of fiscal and monetary policy.

The Social Democrats did make at least one exception by going beyond arms' length control in a significant area. During the war-time crisis and far beyond, Social Democrats added detailed regulation of the housing market, including rent control, onto intensive counter-cyclical control of building begun in the 1930's. The employers' confederation, under Edström and his successors, never loudly protested, and in fact participated in commissions vested with the task of regulating construction activity. Counter-cyclical use of construction suited their interests entirely, since during upswings, they knew, intense construction activity drove up exporters costs and attracted away labor in scarce supply. Pension money held in centralized government funds since 1959 was not to be used, as SAF feared, for government equity holdings in industry, but instead only supplied loan capital -- largely to support countercyclical purposes -- especially to the building sector. In their political action against the pension reform and collaboration in its administration, SAF mobilized politically -- with considerable, effect -- to reinforce these particular terms of the alliance.  

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55 On the pension conflict, see Anders Kjellström, Normbildning och konfliktlösning -- En studie om SAPs roll i växelspelet mellan lag och avtal (Stockholm: SAF, 1987), pp. 73-91.
Rent control probably helped keep down wage demands made by industrial workers, while simultaneously keeping a lid on upward wage pressure emanating from uncontrolled building activity. Rent control of course probably perpetuated the chronic housing shortage predating Social Democratic control. Housing shortages perpetuated by sub-market rents caused Social Democratic governments to subsidize development with sub-market interest rates, and then administratively allocated credit to developers queued up for low-interest loans. Organized, predominantly right-wing real estate interests (where Sven Erik Österberg found a home in 1948 a few years before giving up in frustration on the politically lethargic Directors’ Club in 1953) fared badly in efforts to shake off regulation of the housing market, which big industry in various ways collaborated with. Manufactures had few happy memories of the last period of unregulated building and housing market in the 1930’s, when for example even textile producers complained of losing workers to the booming building sector toward the end of the decade. Industry compensated itself later for problems in recruiting workers because of housing shortages partly by building its own worker housing, all the while enjoying cooperation from the Labor Market Board (where it always had representatives from VF) in getting help in arranging credit and conveniently locating public housing.


57 Minutes, SAF board meeting, 29 August, 1939.
projects. Officially, SAF expressed uncertain views about regulation and the costs of Social Democratic housing programs in the 1960's, but since housing for workers was indeed in short supply and because the government and LO since the 1930's supported efforts to keep construction wages under control, the opposition was low-key and muted.

The terms of the cross-class alliance included distributional as well as control matters that favored export industrialists. At the level of industrial relations, and government rent-control, the alliance was clearly antagonistic to the wage levels of construction workers, though they did benefit from massive, but episodic, government programs to make up for chronic housing shortages. During the 1930's, as seen above, LO and the Social Democrats supported employer efforts to hold back construction wages. Also, the later war-time wage freezes did not affect everyone equally, as commonly believed. LO supported employer efforts to hold back construction workers' wages even more stringently than others' -- and even reduce them -- in two ways: with differential settlements for the building sector, and with forms of "solidaristic wage policy" compensating low pay workers at a preferentially high rate for inflation."

Solidaristic wage policy through the 1950's and 1960's continued to have similar effects.

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"See for example Minutes, SAF board meetings, 19 January, 1940 and 25 September, 1941."
Distributionally, large corporations in the export sector benefited from Social Democratic policy in the legislative as well as collective bargaining realm. Most significant was the 1938 corporate tax law, passed as relations between Social Democrats and big business were rapidly warming. The law, responding to demands from big business, was designed in part to cool down the Swedish economy as it began to overheat (with labor shortages in some sectors in part attributable to migration into construction), allowed big business to shelter any or all of their profits in tax-free accounts (cyclical stabilization funds). Money held in these accounts could only be invested later upon government approval. Corporations therefore handed over some control — but only voluntarily and only marginally — over the timing of their investment strategies. They gained materially, and handsomely, in the bargain. The Social Democrats did not use their control over the release of the funds to dictate the nature of investments, and thereby violate the control-related terms of the alliance. Discussions in the Directors' Club indicated enthusiastic acceptance and cooperation on the part of big industrialists wishing to cool down expansion anyway, and at the same time, reduce their tax burden.

Government policies regarding the release of the funds never became a matter of contention from big businessmen who had proved ready to do battle to defend their entrepreneurial control.®

® Discussion of the tax reform is based on Sven Steinmo, "Social democracy versus socialism: Goal adaptation in Social Democratic Sweden," Politics and Society 16:4 (1988); Jonas
Conclusion: SAF's Leaders and Decay of the Alliance

It was not until the 1960's and 1970's that Social Democrats drifted leftward again, with predictable effects on engineering industry's political attitudes. A new political mobilization also coincided with export-oriented big business's loss of control of SAF's bargaining strategies, as the confederation began negotiating what they regarded as excessively high and egalitarian settlements. As engineering employers like ASEA lost clout in an organization not capable of asserting itself against either home-market employers in collective bargaining nor leftward leaning Social Democrats in the political sphere, the cross-class basis of Social Democratic rule vanished. Without a strong cross-class foundation, Social Democrats began subsiding as many among a new generations of voters, receptive to novelty and uninspired by "gray" socialists, fell under the sway of politically re-mobilized big business, with its modern, forward and outward looking, high-tech leadership.

The breakdown of centralized bargaining and the decline of Social Democracy in the 1980's resulted from the violation of the terms of a cross-class alliance favoring the control and

distributional interests of big, export-oriented Swedish business. Centralized bargaining and Social Democratic control were sustained as long as the terms, worked out in the 1930’s and 1940’s, remained inviolate. An employers’ confederation under the control of export-oriented big business was part of the machinery that forged the alliance and enforced its terms. Export industrialists’ loss of control in SAF was as much responsible for the dramatic changes in Swedish politics in the 1980’s as were the leftward tendencies of Social Democrats. How and why they lost control is an interesting story worth telling at greater length elsewhere. In part, the reason lies simply in the growth of employment in private sector services, a home-market sector whose small-scale employers grew in number and representation inside SAF, and partly because of SAF’s recruitment strategies aimed at these groups. For complex reasons, militants inside LO were able to play on their indifference to engineering industry’s problems and their unwillingness to engage in multi-industry lockouts to eliminate wage setting practices that engineering employers ultimately came to find unbearable. For other complex reasons mentioned earlier, the growth of the "sheltered" public sector also played a role in steering SAF policies from the outside and in a way that angered engineering employers.

The autonomy of full-time executive functionaries in employer organizations like SAF, and the divisions within and between sectoral factions within it, mean that engineering employers in Sweden never had complete control, and helps explain why they could ultimately lose their dominance. An executive like Gustaf Söderlund, brought in by Edström, could build alternative or additional bases of support, and play sectors off against each other, in order to enhance their autonomy from individual sectors. Söderlund, for example, displayed considerable independence of Edström on the matter of IUI’s low-profile role in partisan politics. (Edström stood somewhere between Söderlund and the Directors’ Club’s Österberg.) Edström had sought a man with Söderlund’s winning personality, which Söderlund then used to win over even people like Ivar Larson, von Sydow’s vice director, who expressed strong dislike of Edström and perceived a similar dislike among many others on SAF’s board.\(^1\) Edström’s power probably did not suffice to get rid of Larson after von Sydow retired; his records do not indicate he ever tried. His records do show, surprisingly, that as VF chairman he could not even muster the support to replace Georg Styrman as VF’s executive director in 1929 when he wanted to.\(^2\)

\(^{1}\) Larson at one point believed there was "strong opposition" against Edström’s remaining as chairman and therefore support for his wish that Soderlund be both chairman and executive director, as Sydow had been. Larson to Axel Palmgren, 28 August, 1931. Palmgren papers, Volume 12.

\(^{2}\) Styrman apparently had enough strong support from one key individual, and weak opposition from another, in VF’s board to protect him from Edström. He probably also had support from many
Stormy relations between VF and SAF’s leadership first appeared on the horizon in 1963 when Söderlund’s successor, Bertil Kugelberg, was able to use his forceful personality and strategic shrewdness against VF. Kugelberg, whose recruitment Edström had supported in 1942 before retiring the next year, was able to play off against each other different groups of employers within a hardening faction of export-oriented employers who wanted tougher efforts from SAF to keep wages down when home-market employers were softer. These employers were even prepared to roll out the old multi-industry lockout, which small employers in the service sector, whom Kugelberg was actively recruiting, resisted. Kugelberg was able to talk employers in the steel sector over into the non-aggressive camp -- at which point engineering employers could not count on getting the crucial small firms in VF, which he actively recruited (to Edström's consternation). Along with Styrman’s recruitment policies, his abrasive personality, which made him unpopular in both union and government circles (Social Democratic and bourgeois alike), was probably among the reasons Edström wanted to get rid of him. For evidence, see Edström to Gustaf Tham, 18 May, 1929; Tham to Edström, 21 May 1929; Edström to Styrman, 2 March, 1929 and 15 December, 1930 in Edström papers, Volume 26 (A3f/styrelse m.m.); Edström to Hugo Hammar, 18 August, 1933, Edström papers, Volume 28 (A3h/styrelse m.m.); Edström to Styrman, 3 July, 1934, Edström papers, Volume 29 (A3i/4.överstyrelse); and Edström to Styrman, 2 June 1938, Edström papers, Volume 30 (A3j/3.Korrespondens). Styrman also escaped efforts by the Directors’ Club, with Söderlund’s support, to use its influence in VF to get rid of Styrman in 1945; but the apparently tenacious Styrman survived as director until 1949. Minutes, Direktörsklubben, 4 October 1945.

Edström scribbles on letter from Axel Bergengren "... Kugelberg ... clever fellow", Bergengren to Edström, 21 May, 1942, and Edström to Söderback, 15 June, 1942, Edström papers, Volume 35 (A143).
solidarity they needed against LO and its metalworkers."

It was Kugelberg's protege, Curt-Steffan Giesecke, who presided over the negotiations in 1969 that VF ultimately came to regard as disastrous. Giesecke was hired as a young man as a SAF functionary, and was professionally socialized in the environment established by the independent Kugelberg as the dominance of engineering employers in SAF subsided. (Tryggve Holm, from VF, unlike Edström, took a back-seat role as chairman.) Officially, Giesecke retired for personal reasons in 1978. There is good reason to suspect, however, that the arrival of Curt Nicolin in 1976 as the new SAF chairman, had something to do with it."

Nicolin, like Edström, had made his mark as a dynamic chief executive at ASEA.

Under Nicolin, SAF began to take on a new militancy to turn back the clock on mistakes made during Giesecke's time. Employers from all sectors supported Nicolin's politically militant approach, but unity was complete only on the managerial


"See for example Olof Ehrenkrona, Nicolin. En svensk historia (Stockholm: Timbro, 1991), p. 267, 69,
and investment control issues that the Social Democrats had begun taking radical stands on. On the distributio

al issues associated with export industry’s dominance in the collective bargaining process, the unity was brittle at best. The balance of power in the hands of groups within SAF, in the labor market outside of SAF’s control, and in the political sphere had changed greatly since Edström, another ASEA executive, took control in 1931. The power in SAF of employers in home market or sheltered sectors, in alliance with political forces outside SAF, had grown too great. To dislodge the new cross-class alliance intersecting SAF, the labor movement, and the government, engineering employers found they had to either leave SAF or disable it. With the support of other groups inside SAF who preferred a disabled SAF with VF to a dismembered SAF without VF, engineering employers decentralized the bargaining system, and one pillar of the Swedish model -- centralized industrial relations -- was toppled.
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