

# **The ABC of syndicalist sections**

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A syndicalist section is a local union in the workplace, a job branch. The section is open to all employees except bosses. Sections within the Swedish SAC are intended to be a power base for changing workplaces and ultimately changing society as a whole. Below, Rasmus Hästbacka addresses three broad questions: Why form sections? How do sections work? What can sections achieve?

## 1. WHY FORM SECTIONS?

### A dual function

The Swedish word for section is *driftsektion*. Translated into English that is *operating section*. The term operating refers to the long-term vision that employees should take over and operate the workplace themselves. Democracy at work lays the ground for a society of free and equal individuals. That is the syndicalist view.

In the short-term, syndicalist sections are working for immediate improvements: a healthy work environment, secure employment, higher wages, a better balance between work and leisure time/family, etc. Such progress requires systematic organizing in the workplace.

Syndicalists emphasize that sections have this *dual task* or *dual function* in class struggle, i.e. sections serve a function in the struggle for immediate improvements *and* democracy at work.

By building worker-run sections, workers can develop the collective strength and competence to introduce worker-run workplaces in all industries. In other words, it is through workers' offensive struggle for daily demands that workers can approach the long-term vision and prepare for its realization. Class struggle driven to its peak can bring about a better world for everyone.

### Organizing

By the term *organizing* I am referring to the social process whereby co-workers develop and use their collective strength in a systematic way. This process can be divided into three dimensions: (1) we build a formal section, (2) we develop a movement and (3) we mobilize around collective struggle and bargaining.

A formal section provides stability for the movement. Sections bridge the ups and downs of struggle. The movement dimension of organizing is about workers participating and building a sense of community at work. Struggle and bargaining is about raising collective demands, presenting arguments and putting pressure on the employer when arguments are ignored. Successful bargaining is the final step in a successful organizing process.

Here, I will focus on dimension 1 (the formal dimension). Readers who want to read more about dimension 2 and 3 (movement and struggle), can read a separate article about that.

### Form a section

A section can be formed if there are at least three members at a certain workplace. The members hold a constituent meeting, adopt bylaws for the section and elect a board. SAC has basic bylaws for all sections that can be supplemented and adapted to the local situation.

A section can include one workplace or several connected workplaces. The scope of the section is defined by the section itself. The section's counterparty can also be one or more employers. It all depends on how the production of goods or services in question is structured.

In legal terms, the section is a non-profit and non-governmental organization. It is a legal person who has the right to collective bargaining, take industrial action and enter into agreements. According to SAC's bylaws, the section practices self-determination in local affairs and direct

democracy. The section itself thus decides whether to stage strikes, blockades, or other forms of industrial action. This principle is called *local right to industrial action*.

### **The section in action**

A section is both a forum and tool. It is a forum in which co-workers can agree on what needs to change in the workplace and a tool for enforcing that change.

Through the section, you and your co-workers can unite the workforce and create a better workplace for everyone. That requires that you organize a sense of union community, a safe starting point to improve conditions. The fellow members in your Local chapter of SAC will assist the section with education, forums for exchanging experiences, production of agitation material and other initiatives that may facilitate your organizing efforts.

Through the section, members raise union demands and put collective pressure on the employer side to enforce demands. You raise issues that you think can unite the workforce. You use methods that involve many co-workers or at least have a broad support. You choose the battles you have the best chance of winning. The union is behind you and the decision-making power is always in your hands.

Members of a section have several alternatives for action at work. They can act formally through the section or informally but with the support of the section. The latter is also called extra-union mobilization. The section can initiate official cooperation with other unions. In that case you must be sure that the other unions are on the side of employees and follow directives from the shop floor. Syndicalists always seek cooperation with their colleagues, but not with union representatives who ruin cooperation.

In the event of a strike or other labor conflict that results in a loss of wages, section members receive economic support. Each Local chapter of SAC has a local conflict fund that is supplemented by SAC's joint conflict fund. The economic support does not cover the loss of wages to one hundred percent. Support is there to help you and your co-workers carry out a successful labor conflict. Successful sections are a power base for changing our workplaces and society at large.

## **2. HOW DO SECTIONS WORK?**

### **Base democracy**

A guiding democratic principle for syndicalists is that everyone who is affected by decisions should have the right to influence those decisions. A common misconception is that trade unions must be governed either by representative democracy or by direct democracy. Syndicalism combines both forms of government. We call it base democracy.

At the section's base level, the rank-and-file level, direct democratic decisions are made through member meetings or the ballot box. Members are elected to positions of trust at a representative level. They implement decisions, coordinate activities, and make decisions in urgent matters or in matters of minor importance. Thus, representatives not only implement decisions but also make certain decisions. Their mandate can be specified by directives from below.

Every step in the union's work – formulating demands, choosing methods of struggle, and concluding agreements – is always decided at the base level, unless a limited decision-making power has been explicitly delegated to elected representatives. The rank-and-file thus sets a strict

framework for its elected representatives. Representatives are accountable to and can be recalled immediately by the member meeting.

The main rule at the member meetings is that decisions are made by an absolute majority, i.e. a proposal wins if it receives more than 50 percent of the votes cast. The chairman of the meeting asks the participants to say YES to approve a certain proposal or YES to reject it. The chairman assesses whether approval outweighs rejection or the other way around. If someone requests a vote count, all individual votes are counted instead.

### **In the event of conflict**

If the section is to organize a strike or other industrial action, the action should be based on a qualified majority decision or preferably full unanimity/consensus. Decisions on industrial action must be made by a large majority at a well-attended meeting. Once the decision has been made, it is binding for all members.

Industrial conflict requires strong unity. A collective action should not be organized if only a small majority of the members have voted in favor of it.

### **Departments**

A section that encompasses several workplaces or a large workplace can form smaller subdivisions or departments. A department is just like the larger section a forum and tool for acting together.

A department brings together a work team, a craft or other naturally defined groups of employees. An example of a situation where colleagues may find it natural to form a department is when colleagues already meet in daily tasks at work. Another situation may be that people in a craft are scattered and do not meet but have a need to start meeting around a craft interest.

### **Workplace representative**

The department becomes the members' meeting point in the immediate environment. Each department has a workplace representative, a contact person (in Swedish: *arbetsplatsombud*). The representative maintains personal contact with the department's members and is a link to the overall section board. Representatives can move from simple tasks to more demanding assignments.

The role of the department evolves gradually. A reasonable starting point may be that the members have regular lunch meetings and recruit co-workers within the area of their department. They can handle notice boards and folder stands, welcome new members and lead study groups. The department establishes the union presence in everyday life. It is based on the members' self-organization. It cannot be administered by the section board. Then it will be an empty shell or an inhibiting bureaucracy.

### **Development**

When the time is right, the departments become more formal units with decision making meetings, written minutes and their own elected representatives. Former representatives/contact persons with simple tasks are given more demanding assignments. Each department can then solve problems for its specific staff category through, for example, collective bargaining and small-scale industrial action. At the same time, representatives from all departments come together in the overall section board to pursue common interests.

In a large-scale union that feels anonymous, no sense of community exists. Therefore, smaller departments are needed. The department is a personal forum of members. A member may be familiar with all fellow members in the department, but not with several hundred or a thousand

members in a large section. Each department and the section as a whole also need to be represented by familiar faces, fellow workers who enjoy the trust of the entire rank-and-file collective.

### 3. WHAT CAN SECTIONS ACHIEVE?

#### **Employment security**

SAC is currently a small union. We are about 3000 members. Nevertheless, it is easy to give positive examples of what our sections accomplish. One of many successful sections is the section at a food factory in the county of Skåne. The section has pushed through more permanent employment contracts.

#### **Health and safety**

An example of how a minority of syndicalists can improve the working conditions of all employees is a creative notice of action that was declared within Stockholm's commuter trains. The employer was reluctant to provide staff with warm winter uniforms. The bigger unions within LO and TCO got nowhere in negotiations. The syndicalists therefore announced that they would use extremely ugly uniforms that they had designed themselves, with a photo attached to the notice. The employer then gave the entire staff new uniforms.

Another example is my previous workplace, the University in the city of Umeå. Science teachers and researchers in our section pushed through a move from so-called sick houses (in Swedish: *sjuka hus*) to healthy buildings.

#### **Wages**

A third example of a militant minority is the syndicalists at Eco Glocal, a subcontractor to Volvo Trucks in Umeå. The employer agreed with the local job branch of LO on wage reductions of several thousand Swedish kronor a month. In response, the syndicalists initiated a collective slowdown (i.e. reduction of the pace of work). The old system of remuneration was thereafter reintroduced.

SAC is the only union in Sweden that is fairly successful at organizing migrant workers. One example is Polish workers at the cleaning company Perfect Maid in Gothenburg. They informed the client companies about their low wages and bad conditions and urged them to contact their employer. Those clients who didn't express sympathy with the cleaners became the object of strikes. As a result, everyone got a pay raise, among other improvements.

#### **Pregnant workers**

Another section of migrants is active in Zalando's warehouse. The workers have acquired the right to take breaks every hour and chairs to rest on. They simply took breaks and demanded chairs again and again. Those are important victories, especially for pregnant workers, considering that Zalando is a hellhole similar to Amazon's warehouses.

#### **The power of agitation**

In the Stockholm subway, during the first decade of the 21st century, a section staged a three-year organizing plan. One of several long-running conflicts concerned the right for all workers to take breaks. An interesting experience was that the massive agitation of syndicalists (both oral and written) could unite the work force really fast. Thus, a collective attitude was expressed in certain issues that produced better results than the section's strikes and blockades. Class struggle isn't just about putting economic pressure on profits but putting psychological and moral pressure on bosses as well.

### **Individual wage setting**

Another positive example is the section at Eriksdalsvillan in Stockholm. The section has stopped so-called individual wage setting. This means that managers set wages arbitrarily. The section has stopped it and instead equalized wage differences, which is rare in the Swedish labor market.

It is easy to list positive examples but more difficult to explain how you build collective strength and improve conditions. I will try to clarify it below.

### **Two tracks**

A question that often arises when a syndicalist section is started is this: should the section aim to recruit a majority of the staff or become a driving minority? The answer is yes. Both goals make sense, provided that the section's primary ambition is to promote the joint action of employees. If this leads to the section recruiting a majority, then it is a welcome bonus, but hardly a development that can be predicted or decided in advance.

Regardless of whether the section encompasses a minority or grows to a majority, it is important to work on two tracks at the same time: both develop the section and create cross-union community, that is cohesion among colleagues regardless of union affiliation. These two tracks are mutually reinforcing each other.

### **Cross-union cohesion**

The section can choose to hold its meetings for members only or have meetings that are open to other colleagues as well. At the section's decision-making meetings, only members have the right to vote, but the meeting may decide that non-members can attend and also make proposals.

If the section chooses closed meetings, it is important that members also promote discussions for all employees who want to change the workplace. This can take the form of, for example, cross-union lunches every week, an on-line forum, or cross-union workshops at leisure time where common strategies are drawn up. If the staff benefits from both a section and a cross-union group, then of course you strive to develop both groups.

As said, the section can try to initiate official cooperation with other unions. If no official cooperation is initiated, then cooperation between colleagues in different unions can still be developed.

### **Direct influence**

As soon as there are three syndicalists in a workplace, it is meaningful to start a section. When syndicalists organize at a workplace, all employees become winners. The section can advance the position of employees by influencing the management *directly* or *indirectly*.

A direct impact is achieved when syndicalists, together with colleagues in other unions, raise common demands and put pressure on management. Here I want to emphasize that pressure almost never begins with a strike. There are many alternatives to striking to consider and test.

### **Indirect influence**

An indirect impact is achieved when the section pushes other unions in front of it. Such an impact often takes place in a kind of triangle drama at the workplace. In many Swedish workplaces, there are not just two parties (union and employer) but three. These are *the staff on the shop floor* and at the top representatives of bureaucratic and *consensus-seeking unions* and *the management*. The consensus unions are the unions within LO, TCO and Saco (except for some militant job branches in these organizations).

It is there – between the staff, the consensus unions and management – that a triangular drama often takes place. The consensus union representatives dampen the staff's demands and militancy and make it easier for management to implement its plans.

When a section begins to pursue collective interests of the staff, it gives both the consensus union and management a new incentive to meet the staff's demands. Otherwise, the consensus union risk losing members to the section, which can spur more militancy. If representatives of the consensus union nevertheless take the side of management, the section can recruit more co-workers and become even stronger.

A syndicalist section creates win-win situations for all employees. Even very small sections can drive consensus unions and management in a positive direction. The basis is good relations on the shop floor so that syndicalists enjoy trust by many co-workers.

In this article I have focused on the formal dimension of organizing. As said, in a separate article I dive deeper into the other two dimensions, i.e. movement and struggle.

### **A strategic enquiry**

Finally, it should be emphasized that all sections need to navigate the field of labor law. This is important especially when sections take industrial action and demand collective agreements. SAC has conducted a strategic enquiry concerning a harsh anti-strike law that was introduced in 2019. Conclusions and advice from the enquiry have been summarized in SAC's paper *Arbetaren* and on the website Counterpunch. There you will get a short introduction to the legal aspects of the Swedish labor market.

### **Rasmus Hästbacka**

*The article is based on Hästbacka's book (free online) Swedish syndicalism – An outline of its ideology and practice. More articles by the author can be found in Anarchist Library [here](#).*

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Article written for workers new to on-the-job organizing. Translated from the Swedish magazine Syndikalisten. Also published on Znetwork. The English version (below) contains more examples of successful syndicalist sections. It also sheds more light on the so-called dual function of sections. The author is a member of the Swedish syndicalist union SAC.

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