



# Militant attitudes among Swedish employees

The role of class and social identification

Johanna Palm

# Militant attitudes among Swedish employees

The role of class and social identification

Johanna Palm

*Department of Sociology, Stockholm University*

**Abstract:** Using a mixed-methods approach, including data from a national sample of 1851 employees and 10 in-depth interviews with various categories of employees, this paper examines what factors influence different attitudes towards industrial action among Swedish employees. It adds to previous research by showing that social class has a strong influence on attitudes, both in terms of its effects on wages and working conditions and in terms of how class identification and class background affects perceptions of (in)justice, which help explain the preference for different strategies in relation to job dissatisfaction.

**Keywords:** Industrial action, trade union, social class, social identification, collective action

The Department of Sociology Working Paper Series 32

ISSN 2002-7729

© Johanna Palm



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

## Introduction

Industrial conflicts have been diminishing in the majority of Western countries since the 1980s, and trade unions have been weakened in terms of density and influence (Gall, 2013; Godard, 2011; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). Meanwhile, increased flexibility and insecurity in the labor market and rising wage dispersion and income inequality has been observed during the same period of time, and evidence show that these trends are partly related (Godard, 2011; Pontusson, 2013). Industrial conflicts such as strikes may be costly and are for that reason often considered a last resort of action, and the occurrence of conflict does not necessarily reflect the strength of the union movement. For instance, some scholars argue that the threat of conflict is more powerful than actual conflict (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). Nevertheless, the ability to strike is generally considered one of the most significant power resources of the union. Hence, many scholars argue that the perception of unions as weak may be altered by an increased strike frequency, and previous research indicate that high strike frequency is related to both union growth and high union density (Haslam & Veenstra, 2000; Kelly, 1998; Checchi & Visser, 2005; Western, 1997).

Much research has been devoted to mapping union density trends and strike patterns in Western countries (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Kjellberg, 2001, 2010; Thörnqvist, 1994, 2007), and the individual strike propensity has been the subject of investigation in several (mainly Anglo-Saxon) contexts. Still, the knowledge about what affects attitudes towards industrial action among employees is somewhat limited. Most previous studies focus on either actual strike behavior and/or attitudes among a limited sample of employees (i.e., case-studies) (Akkerman et al., 2013; Brown Johnson & Jarley, 2004; Martin, 1986; McClendon & Klaas, 1993). Since the willingness to take industrial action may affect power relations in the labor market, it is of interest to increase the knowledge about potential mobilization among employees in general. Using a mixed-methods approach, including empirical data from a postal survey and in-depth interviews, the aim of this study is to investigate what factors influence different attitudes towards industrial action among Swedish employees. The main focus of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of social class and processes of social identification on the degree of militant attitudes, and thus to study what role material versus idealistic factors play for different attitudes towards industrial action.

# Theory

## Class, norms and social identification

As stated by Korpi (1985), the power resources of employers and employees differ in numerous ways. The most significant difference is that employers' resources are to a higher degree individual, whereas employees' resources are primarily collective. This affects the possible alternative actions available for employees and employers in pursuing and defending their interests. Consequently, the ability to take industrial action, particularly in the form of strikes, is of central significance for employees because their alternative options are limited (Korpi, 1985, p. 34; Brandl & Traxler, 2009, p. 522). However, empirical evidence indicates that the perceived need for collective action and the union in, for instance, wage bargaining with employers varies between different categories of employees. It is higher among blue-collar workers than white-collar workers (Berglund & Furåker, 2003; Bengtsson, 2008). Depending on the scarcity of skills and expertise, which varies by class location, the ability to defend and promote one's interests in relation to the employers individually differs (Korpi, 1985; Wright, 1997). My hypothesis is that attitudes towards industrial action also vary between different class locations. I expect that positive attitudes towards industrial action are most frequent among categories of employees with low degree of control and skills/expertise (i.e. the working class; unskilled and skilled workers) and least frequent among categories with high degrees of control and expertise (i.e. higher-level white collar).

Attitudes towards and the willingness to participate in industrial action has primarily been analyzed in terms of instrumentality, job dissatisfaction, social support/norms and union commitment (see, for instance, Akkerman et al., 2013; Martin, 1986; McClendon & Klaas, 1993). Instrumentality refers to individual gains versus costs of participating in strikes, which may vary depending on the context. E.g., job security and whether or not the strike is legal may be of significance, as well as the perceived benefit(s) of the strike (i.e. the cause to strike). Job dissatisfaction is generally understood as a motive for participation, and refers to different aspects of the working life including working conditions, the management, and wages (McClendon & Klaas, 1993). However, as stated by Brown Johnson & Jarley (2004), job (dis)satisfaction and instrumentality has shown mixed results in explaining both willingness to strike and union participation. The authors argue that job dissatisfaction may result in exit strategies rather than (industrial) conflicts depending on whether the reasons for dissatisfaction is attributed to the employer or not (Brown Johnson & Jarley 2004, p. 547). An alternative approach to explaining the occurrence or absence of collective mobilization is presented in mobilization theory (Kelly, 1998). In contrast to focusing on

power resources, instrumentality and job (dis)satisfaction, mobilization theory focus on the transformation of discontent into injustice, defined in terms of distribution of rewards, punishments and workloads, by processes of attribution and social identification among subordinate groups with common interests (Kelly, 1998). Focus thus lies on processes that help explain variation in behavior and attitudes among individuals within similar class locations and with similar power resources, by focusing on how, when and why dissatisfaction leads to collective mobilization. The theory is based on the assumption that feelings of discontent and/or structures of opportunities are not enough to explain the occurrence (or absence) of collective organization or action. Feelings of discontent have to be transformed into collective grievances that are attributed to, and thought to be able to be resolved by, an opposing agent, i.e., the employer.<sup>1</sup> This implicates a sense of injustice derived from what might be termed morally unacceptable choices of action and behavior on the part of the employer (Brown Johnson & Jarley, 2004, p. 547), and (in)justice should in this respect be understood as a relative concept defined in relation to other groups such as the management, or other comparative groups/occupations in the labor market (Kelly, 1998). For collective grievances and attribution to occur, a sense of group identity based on conflicting interests between ‘us and them’ has to emerge among individuals at the workplace, or in wider terms in the form of class identity. Kelly argues that (union or activist) leaders play a crucial role in the formation of group identity and the process of formation of collective interests and attribution, implicating that a strong union work-place organization is of significance for this process. However, the definition of collective interests, which is the base (although not sufficient) for collective action and organization, can also emerge from social and family networks, and the sense of grievances that the interests are based on may refer to situations and conditions within a specific workplace but also to conditions regarding distributional patterns within society. This implicates that class background, class identity and ideological approaches may also be significant. Since ideology is used to frame issues of injustice and the perception of the relationship between employees and employers, Kelly argues it plays a significant role in the process of understanding the individual behavior and attitudes of workers towards employers (Kelly, 1997, 1998, p. 29, 126-127; Frege & Kelly, 2003).

In support of mobilization theory, Brown Johnson and Jarley (2004) and Buttigieg et al. (2008) finds that perceptions of workplace injustice in terms

---

<sup>1</sup> If the attribution for the perceived injustice is placed on “uncontrollable forces” such as unemployment rates (or processes of globalization or even immigrants) the chances for collective mobilization or action to occur will decrease. It is, according to mobilization theory, vital that the attribution is put on an agent that may actually be affected by potential mobilization and action, and who has the power to potentially change the conditions that has caused grievances (Kelly, 1998, pp. 29-30).

of distributions and procedures have a stronger influence on workers' willingness to participate in industrial action than instrumentality. They further find that group identity in the workplace and attribution has a positive influence on the willingness to act (Brown Johnson & Jarley, 2004, p. 556; Buttigieg et al., 2008). These results thus suggest that the effects of instrumentality and job (dis)satisfaction may be mediated through group identity, perceptions of (in)justice and attribution. Hence, the issue of what shapes perceptions of (in)justice, attribution and identity becomes relevant. Social support/norms, in terms of social pressure and/or support of striking from co-workers, family and friends, has been found to affect strike propensity in previous studies (Akkerman et al., 2013; Martin, 1986; McClendon & Klaas, 1993). However, it is difficult to clarify what mechanisms affect the occurrence of social support in previous studies. By focusing on class position, class identity and class background, this study investigates if and how social support is related to these aspects. The hypothesis is that class background and class identity may explain variation in social support, as well as different perceptions of (in)justice and attribution affecting attitudes towards industrial action.

## Context

The context may also affect different attitudes towards industrial action. In contrast to the Anglo-Saxon contexts of most previous studies (see Brown Johnson & Jarley, 2004, p. 556; Buttigieg et al., 2008; Darlington, 2012), Sweden is characterized by a high degree of cooperation between the parties in the labor market. In the terms of Richard Hyman (2001), the Swedish trade union movement contains features of social integration, with focus on cooperation and mutual solutions rather than conflict (pp. 46-47). Although the relationship between strong labor market institutions and industrial peace should not be exaggerated, since the political influence of the labor movement and the employers respectively is also central (Korpi, 1981), evidence suggest strong corporative systems in the labor market generate high degrees of industrial peace (Brandl & Traxler, 2009). Periods of high degrees of conflict in Sweden in the past have also coincided with weakened political influence of the labor movement, and/or growth of income inequalities (Kelly, 1998; Korpi, 1981; Thörnqvist, 1994, 2007). However, this pattern has been weakened since the 1990s, since when Sweden has experienced increased income inequalities, particularly between classes, and significantly weaker political power of the labor movement while at the same time industrial conflicts have remained at relatively low levels (Bergholm & Bieler, 2013; Grape et al., 2007; Thörnqvist, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, increased competition

---

<sup>2</sup> Official statistics of strike activity in Sweden show a relatively stable pattern as of the 1970s and onward, with a few exceptions (mainly the general strike in 1980). However, if wild-cat

and slimmed production systems have made many companies increasingly vulnerable to industrial action, while at the same time threats of moving production has made trade unions more cautious to act (Thelen, 2001, p. 77). According to Bergholm and Bieler (2013), the increased internationalization of the capitalist economy has, in the Swedish context, mainly gained the employers due to actual increase of transnational production (p. 57). This may have affected the ability for trade unions to successfully use (threats of) industrial action. Since the perception of the power balance in the labor market may differ between unions and its members/employees (Hyman, 2001), it is still unclear to what degree this development has affected employees' attitudes towards industrial action.

## Methodology

Aiming to better understand the complexity of the phenomenon at hand, this study uses a mixed-methods approach including quantitative and qualitative methods and data in the form of statistical analysis and in-depth interviews. Moran-Ellis et al. (2006) discuss the use of mixed-methods in terms of integration, arguing that the different methods/materials preferably should “stand on their own feet”, but at some point need to be integrated to answer the research question (pp. 51-52). Integration may occur in the collection of data, in the analysis or in theoretical interpretations. In this study, integration primarily occurs at the point of analysis and theoretical interpretation (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006, pp. 54-55). A technique that suites this purpose is *pattern matching* (see Harding and Seefeldt, 2013). Pattern matching is used to examine if expected patterns, that is patterns that should exist if certain mechanisms are at work (among which some may have been found in the statistical analysis), exist in the data. Combined with analytical techniques of contrasting and comparing different cases, it is then possible to investigate how the processes of certain mechanisms work and to find unexpected mechanisms not detected in the statistical analysis (Harding & Seefeldt, 2013, pp. 94ff). This approach seemed fruitful to use in this study to be able to compensate for unobservables in the quantitative data and to, with more in-depth information, better understand the processes at hand. Some concepts of interest in this study, in particular social (class) identity, (in)justice and instrumentality verses ideology, may be difficult to fully grasp within the range of survey data, and the possibility to understand complex phenomena generally increases by integrating different methods (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006, p. 48). Because information on class identity, class background and ideology did not exist in the statistical material, the choice to use different

---

strikes are taken into consideration, Sweden experienced a conflict peak during the 1970 and 80s. Since then, wild-cat strikes have been diminishing (Thörnqvist 1994, 2007).

methods was also pragmatic. As argued by Patricia Fosh (1993), the concept of ideology versus instrumentality is not clear-cut, and many union members' display some amount of both of these often considered opposing orientations towards the union and union activities, depending on the context (Fosh, 1993, pp. 579-580, see also Kjellberg, 2001, p. 198). With qualitative data, such nuances are more easily detected. My assumption is that this is the case with social identity and (in)justice as well. For instance, identification may be strong or weak and it may come and go depending on the situation. Individuals may also possess more than one identity that is of significance for understanding the formation of attitudes, and grievances may be more or less collective and not simply either or (cf. Kelly, 1997, 1998).

## Quantitative data and operationalization

The statistical data used in this study is taken from a postal survey conducted in conjunction with the Labor force survey of 2006, gathered by Statistics Sweden. It consists of 1851 respondents, with a response rate of approximately 52 percent out of everyone asked to participate. Out of those who agreed to participate, 72 percent responded. The population contains Swedish employees aged 18-64, which is the population used in this study. The data is somewhat unevenly distributed in certain aspects. For instance, 55 percent of the respondents are women and union density within the investigated population exceeds the union density among Swedish employees at the time of the investigation. 83.5 percent of the investigated population stated that they were organized in a union, while the figure for union density among Swedish employees in general at the time (2006) was 78 percent (Bengtsson, 2008).

The dependent variable measures attitudes towards industrial action on a scale from 1 to 5; 1 meaning the respondent does not agree trade unions should take industrial action more frequently than today and 5 meaning the respondent agrees to a very high degree that trade unions should take industrial action more frequently than today.<sup>3</sup> Independent variables included in the analysis are age, gender, union membership, sector of employment, employment rate, size of workplace and social class. Class is operationalized in accordance with SEI (socio-economic index), including five categories: unskilled workers (code 11+12), skilled workers (code 21+22), lower-level white collar (code 33+36), middle-level white collar (code 46) and higher-level white collar (code 56+57).

Three mediating variables – work influence, wage and perceived ability to find a new job - were also included in the analysis to examine possible mo-

---

<sup>3</sup> In the descriptive analysis the categories “Very high degree” and “High degree” and “Low degree” and “Very low degree/not at all” has been merged to the categories “High degree” and “Low degree,” respectively.



tives for industrial action in accordance with the theoretical approaches. It is reasonable to assume that influence on several aspects regarding the work situation - including the wage and participation and control of job assignments and working hours - varies between class locations (Bengtsson, 2008; Korpi, 1985; Wright, 1997). The assumption is not just that that low individual influence gives rise to a greater need for collective action and vice versa, but also that it may explain some of the variance between different class locations (i.e. an indirect effect). The degree of work influence is measured using a battery of questions transformed into a summarized index ( $\alpha=0.86$ ), where the high scores reflect high degree of influence and vice versa. Included measures regard the structure of the workday, work assignments, weekly working hours etc. To measure the influence of wages, information about the respondents' wages is used. The variable is divided into four categories: 5000-19999 SEK, 20000-24999 SEK, 25000-34999 SEK, 35000 SEK or more. Correlation between class and income on the one hand, and income and attitudes towards industrial action on the other thus indicates whether or not the wage affects attitudes towards industrial action. The perceived ability to find a new job is used as a proxy for security in the labor market. As observed by Narisada & Schieman (2016), job security and financial security reduces job dissatisfaction related to unfair pay. Accordingly, the perceived ability to find a new job may affect the perceived need for collective action and thus also attitudes towards industrial action. The variable is measured using a battery of questions - where the respondents' state to what degree they believe they could find another job equal to or better than their current one at the same or another employer - transformed into an index. The included variable is a scale where the higher scores reflect a high perceived ability to find a new job and lower scores reflects a low perceived ability ( $\alpha=0.91$ ). The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and OLS regression.

### Qualitative data, selection and analytical strategy

The qualitative material consists of ten in-depth interviews conducted at separate occasions during 2013-2014. A combination of random and purposive selection was used. It was random with regard to variation between and within certain categories such as class, gender, sector, age and size of workplace, and purposive to the extent that certain characteristics (for instance being male, working class and working within the private sector) were of particular interest due to their possible significance for understanding the processes investigated (Harding & Seefeldt, 2013, pp. 102-103). I mainly used a so-called snowball selection strategy when finding respondents. The respondents vary in age between 26-60 years, and in occupation (factory workers, assistant nurse, social workers, finance/banking workers, kindergarten teachers, nurses, and bus/taxi drivers), gender, class location, sector, size

of work-place and type of employment contract. All interviews were conducted similarly: broad and open questions about industrial action, the union and class were asked in the style of semi-structured interviews.

The analytical strategy used was thematic qualitative analysis (TQA), in which a second-ordered construction, in which the narratives of the respondents are interpreted in the research context (Aspers, 2001), was created in a thematic order. This implicates that the focus of the analysis was on themes found in the material and further related to the theories rather than to personal narratives. This analytical strategy suited the aim of pattern matching (Harding & Seefeldt, 2013) and the purpose of trying to identify possible mechanisms rather than generalize well.

## Results

### Statistical analysis

Table 1 and 2 reports distributions of different attitudes towards industrial action. The results in Table 1 show that the largest proportion of Swedish employees agrees with the statement that trade unions should take industrial action more frequently. 37 percent declare that the statement meets their opinion to a high degree, 30 percent state that it meets their opinion to neither a high nor low degree, and 33 percent states that it meets their opinion to a low degree. Although the opinions are evenly spread, the results indicate relatively strong support for industrial action among Swedish employees and a relatively high potential for mobilizing employees to take industrial action.

**Table 1.** Opinion distribution among Swedish employees on frequency of trade union involvement in industrial action (percent).

High degree	37
Neither high nor low degree	30
Low degree	33
Total	100
Total <i>n</i>	1,587

**Table 2.** Frequency of trade union involvement in industrial action. Opinion distribution among Swedish employees by class, gender and sector (percent).

	Unskilled workers		Skilled workers		Lower white-collar		Middle white-collar		Higher white-collar	
	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public
<b>Men</b>										
High degree	47	35	38	46	32	53	26	40	15	26
Neither high/low	29	35	36	31	21	33	27	37	22	24
Low degree	24	30	26	23	47	14	47	23	63	50
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Women</b>										
High degree	51	55	59	61	32	43	26	40	17	22
Neither high/low	29	32	26	27	27	34	30	37	23	29
Low degree	20	13	15	12	41	23	34	23	60	49
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

The results in Table 2 indicate that class is associated with attitudes towards industrial action. However, the results also suggest that class and gender may interact. Female workers, both skilled and unskilled, consistently present more militant attitudes compared to male workers, both within the private and public sectors. The category presenting the highest degrees of militant attitudes is skilled female workers within the public sector, a category dominated by low paid jobs such as assistant nurses. Among male workers, the most militant category is unskilled workers in the private sector. Moreover, the results indicate that sector of employment influence attitudes towards industrial action. Employees within the public sector present higher degrees of militant attitudes in all categories except for unskilled male workers, where the association is reverse. The category of unskilled male workers in the public sector is, however, very small and only contains 20 observations; thus this result should be interpreted with caution. Another category that stands out is men in the lower-level white-collar position who work in the public sector. Compared with women in the same position, and with men and women in the lower level white-collar category working in the private sector and men and women in the middle- and higher-level white collar positions working within both the private and the public sector - this category presents significantly higher degrees of militant attitudes. This particular category appears to be more comparable with both female and male skilled workers than other white-collar workers in terms of militant attitudes.

Table 3 reports the results from the OLS regression in four different models. Model I includes social class and control variables. In Model II, III and

IV, the potentially mediating variables wage, work influence and perceived ability to find a new job are included.

The findings in Model I suggest, in accordance with the hypothesis, that class location has a strong influence on attitudes towards industrial action. Unskilled workers show the highest degree of militant attitudes, followed by skilled workers, lower-level white collar, middle-level white collar and finally higher-level white collar. Individuals organized in a union present a higher degree of militant attitudes compared with non-organized individuals. The same association is found among individuals working in the public sector compared with individuals working in the private sector and for individuals working in large workplaces compared with smaller ones. Age shows a small negative effect, indicating that younger individuals have more militant attitudes than older individuals. Gender and type of employment contract show no significant effects on attitudes towards industrial action.

As indicated in the descriptive statistics, gender may interact with class. When controlled for, this interaction effect (not presented) does not show a statistically significant effect. In a bivariate analysis, gender presents significant effect, indicating that women to higher degree present militant attitudes than men. When controlled for sector of employment this effect disappear, suggesting it is the strongly segregated Swedish labor market, where women to a higher degree than men work within low paid jobs in the public sector (Boye et al., 2014), that causes the impact of gender.

Model II shows that wage, as predicted, has a strong influence on attitudes towards industrial action. The lower the wage, the higher the probability to agree that unions should take industrial action more frequently. Since the effect of class is quite strongly reduced by wage, the findings also suggest that the wage partly explains variation in attitudes between different class locations. Although reduced, statistically significant differences with regard to class location are still shown in Model II, with the exception of the category lower-level white collar. The result for size of workplace and union membership is quite similar to Model I. However, concerning sector the effect is reduced when controlled for wage. This result indicates that some of the variation between sector and attitudes towards industrial action is explained by the differences in wages between the public and private sector.

When the variable work influence is included in Model III, the effect of class is further reduced. This finding suggests that also work influence explains some of the variance in attitudes towards industrial action between different class locations. Another interesting result in Model III is that the effect of wage is also reduced when controlled for work influence. Although this result may not be very surprising per se, the individual effects of class location, wage and work influence, as well as how they affect each other, indicates a complex relationship of factors affecting militant attitudes. For example, the result indicates that poor working conditions may partly be compensated by wage.

Model IV shows that, in contrast to the hypothesis, the perceived ability to find a new job has no statistically significant effect on attitudes towards industrial action. The effects of class, wage and work influence are only marginally reduced in this model, suggesting that this variable does not explain much of the remaining variance between different class locations.

**Table 3.** Probability to agree that Unions should be more involved in Industrial Action. OLS.

	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
<b>Class (ref: Higher-level white-collar)</b>				
Unskilled workers	1.06***	0.55***	0.43***	0.43***
Skilled workers	0.92***	0.46***	0.37**	0.37***
Lower-level white-collar	0.58***	0.22	0.17	0.16
Middle-level white-collar	0.47***	0.27**	0.22*	0.22*
<b>Gender (ref: Men)</b>				
Women	1.10	-0.03	-0.05	-0.06
<b>Union membership (ref: Non-org.)</b>				
Organized	0.57***	0.52***	0.51***	0.50***
<b>Sector of empl. (ref: Private)</b>				
Public	0.26***	0.16*	0.17*	0.16*
<b>Type of empl. contract (ref: Temporary)</b>				
Permanent	-0.16	0.04	-0.03	-0.02
<b>Size of workplace (ref: 1-9)</b>				
500 or more	0.23*	0.29**	0.21*	0.21
100-499	0.10	0.12	0.05	0.04
50-99	0.16	0.17	0.11	0.11
10-49	0.08	0.08	0.03	0.04
<b>Age</b>	-0.01*	-0.003	-0.003	-0.01
<b>Wage (ref: 35,000 or more)</b>				
5 - 19,999		1.04***	0.90***	0.85***
20 - 24,999		0.75***	0.66***	0.63***
25 - 34,999		0.48***	0.43***	0.40**
<b>Work influence</b>			-0.19***	-0.18***
<b>Perceived substitutability</b>				-0.07
<b>R2 (adjusted)</b>	0.14	0.17	0.18	0.18
<b>Constant</b>	2.14***	1.55***	2.33***	2.70***
<b>Total n</b>	1482	1482	1482	1482

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ .

## Interview analysis

The findings in the statistical analysis indicate that class location has a strong influence on different attitudes towards industrial action among Swedish employees. The results further indicate that wage and work influence explain some of the variance between different class locations. However, some of the variance is still unexplained by these factors, and the aim is to try and identify further factors that may help explain this variance, and to develop a deeper understanding about when and how different factors or mechanisms come into play.

### *The need for industrial action as collective means; when, how and why?*

The findings in the statistical analysis indicate that the support for industrial action is relatively strong among Swedish employees in general, independent of class position. In the qualitative study, all informants expressed somewhat positive attitudes towards industrial action, and they all expressed that industrial action, primarily in the form of strikes or even the threat of strikes, is the most effective weapon (if not the only one) that employees have if they wish to influence their working life situation. This was argued with reference to differences in power balance between employees and employers, where employers' resources were acknowledged as collective rather than individual. As expressed by one of the informants:

Woman (26, middle-level white collar): And then it is that you notice that the employer has a lot of power, and that you don't have much to say on your own. For that reason, I think it is positive to have an organization behind me, where we can make things happen together.

Some of the informants further discussed this issue in terms of a variety depending on occupation, education and class, arguing that the required level of skills and expertise affects the substitutability within an occupation, partly consistent with results from previous studies (Berglund & Furåker, 2003; Bengtsson, 2008). Others believed this type of collective action to be more or less equally important for all categories of employees. In this respect, different degrees of skills scarcity, partly varying by branches, was the main argument for (perceived or believed) different needs of industrial action. Nevertheless, personal skills with regard to negotiations were another factor that several informants believed might affect the need for collective action, particularly among more skilled workers/employees. As expressed by one informant:

Man (31, higher-level white collar): Some individuals are capable of negotiating by themselves, and to be strong and manage to get through both one thing and another. Just to dare to stand up for one self. But some people don't have that ability, and

maybe then it is nice to be included in a group, and that the union speaks for them. [...] (Particularly) In branches where the employees are more exposed, where... you earn a lot less, the employment terms are a lot worse... like night work and a lot of dangerous work activities. It's not like that where I work.

These aspects, particularly the individual ability to negotiate, were thus mainly related to the perceived personal benefits of collective action, that is instrumentality, rather than to collective benefits or solidarity.

The informants were furthermore quite unanimous regarding for what issues industrial action such as strikes is motivated to use. As was shown in the statistical analysis, wages and work influence appear to affect attitudes towards industrial action. In the qualitative material, the informants also highlighted wages, working conditions/environment and, in some cases, job maintenance. Especially among women working in the public sector, working conditions and staffing were highlighted as important issues. The issue among these informants seemed to be workloads and understaffing, and a few of them discussed overtime bans as potentially effective weapons. For these women, issues of workloads were sometimes more important than wages in terms of attitudes towards industrial action. As expressed by one informant:

Woman (30, higher-level white collar): I think that the working environment many times... in many fields and within many occupations, it is overlooked in favour of wages. I imagine that the union... It is easier to discuss numbers, those issues are easier to pursue, than to discuss issues of understaffing and so on, I believe. [...] But... issues of staffing and working conditions and such... Maybe there is too little done about that. Too little action. Strike might be an option for that.

Although this particular informant did not work within a highly paid occupation (social worker) compared to other occupations that demand a similar length of education and expertise, the wage was not considered the most important issue. She claimed that a relatively low wage was expected within the occupation, but that a functioning working life and environment was something she demanded from the employer. Thus, depending on individual expectations, but also actual material conditions, different issues might be considered to be of greater importance. When wages were discussed it became clear that this issue is primarily seen in relative terms, rather than in absolute terms. Most of the informants believed industrial action to be a legitimate action to take with the aim of fighting for better wages if and when the wage in a particular occupation was considered low compared with similar occupations, or if the wage growth was low compared with the general wage growth. Both wages and working conditions are thus discussed as motives for industrial action in terms of what is perceived as just.

The informants further differed somewhat with regard to what extent industrial action was perceived as legitimate. Some of the informants - mainly the ones belonging to middle- and higher-level white collar categories but also one informant in the (unskilled) working class category - expressed the need for cautious use of strikes due to a perceived shared responsibility between employees and employers for the wellbeing of the company or organization. Others discussed the need for caution with reference to the possible outcome, i.e., in strategic/instrumental terms. These two positions appear to be partly opposite. The strategic position was expressed in terms of choosing to fight for the most important issues, in terms of what would best engage the employees to take action, while the other position was expressed in terms of responsibility. In these discussions, partly different views of the relationship between employers and employees became visible. Although all informants perceived employers' and employees' interests as opposed to some degree, the informants who expressed some kind of shared responsibility also tended to tone down the opposition between the two parties. They tended to discuss both working conditions and wages from the perspective of the employer, in terms of what was perceived as beneficial for the employer rather than for the employees. Moreover, in discussions of potential conflicts, the employers' perspective was taken into account in a much more obvious way. For example, one informant discussed (potential) conflicts within the export industries as follows:

Man (31, higher-level white collar): In the export industries, there is an obvious responsibility for the union not to put the companies in a situation where they might lose competitiveness due to high costs leading to higher prices on their products, so that no one will buy them and... In those situations, the unions have to; somehow, accept the situation of the global competition.

This may be related to Kelly's discussion on the significance of attribution, and the "stereotyping of the management" (Kelly, 1997, p. 407) in the process of mobilizing employees to participate in industrial action. Although transnational competition may to some degree function as an obstacle for industrial action, the way individuals perceive this still partly depends on one's world views. The informants who expressed this more understanding, and less opposing, position also lacked strong union representation/leaders, in their workplaces (and/or were not affiliated with a union themselves), a factor considered as important in the process of creating attribution.

However, the link between strong workplace organization and attribution is not all that clear. Kelly discusses the role of the (union) leader as important for the process of attribution, and the creation of the management as the "out-group." In some cases though, the informants who expressed perceptions of attributing the management for (their) feelings of deprivation or



injustice also expressed dissatisfaction with both the local and central union leadership in this specific matter. As expressed by one informant:

Man (60, skilled worker): It is also a problem that, when the union threaten with taking action, as they have lately... [...] The demand that has been issued, and which they say they are prepared to fight for, it is so microscopic that it arouses no enthusiasm what so ever among the members. Rather, the members ask themselves, is this really worth striking for? We have more to lose from striking than winning if the demand is meat. [...] So really, the union kills the will to fight among the members by demanding so little. So that it is not worth the trouble.

Although this quotation highlights the significance of the union leadership in the process of mobilizing members to take part in strikes, it also points to the fact that it may very well work both ways. Depending on how the union leader acts, he/she may be able to inspire the members or not, even in cases where the issue of group cohesion/identification and attribution are already met. This highlights the significance of choosing strategically what issues to fight for in the process of mobilization. It also points to the fact that there may exist a discrepancy between the union and its members (as well as potential members) regarding the perception of its ultimate goals and function (cf. Hyman, 2001) that affects potential mobilization and attitudes.

#### *Senses of relative deprivation, injustice and social identification*

All the informants expressed that some kind of redistribution of wealth was for the good of society, and they all considered that too excessive wage discrepancies were disadvantageous and partly unjust in general and a motive to take industrial action. They differed, however, in how they related to their co-workers and whether or not they ascribed themselves any group-identities. The informants who expressed that industrial action should be used with caution with regard to the wellbeing of the employer did not express any strong sense of group-identification with either co-workers or class, in contrast to the opposite position where in most cases both identification with the co-workers and class identification was expressed.

The in-group identification with one's co-workers became visible mainly if, how, and to what degree the informants discussed work-related problems such as wage and working conditions in terms of a collective issue. For example, some informants regarded individually based wages as unjust, and highlighted the significance of equal pay for equal work within the work place as an important aspect. These informants who emphasized the wellbeing of the group, and of all of their co-workers, also tended to express more positive attitudes towards industrial action. As mentioned previously, this was also related to a more clearly opposing position towards the employer. The problems identified, especially those regarding the working environment (such as work-loads and hiring principles) were attributed to the employer in

terms of responsibility, and for that reason they were also thought to be resolvable by the employer. Furthermore, if necessary, industrial action was perceived as a means that could be used for exerting pressure for change. The informants who did not express this sense of identification with ones co-workers tended to express more accepting attitudes towards work-related problems and the employer, and discussed the issues on more individual levels. One informant discussed the topic of working-hours and wages in the following manner:

Man (40, unskilled worker): I don't know, I think maybe I am a quite accepting person somehow. Like, if there are certain conditions, then I think, well this is what it is. Then I can choose to work or not. [...] Then I can rather choose another job. I'm not much for complaining. The way I see it, I chose this job.

This informant expresses individual responsibility for his situation rather than attribute it to the employer. The solution is also expressed in individual terms; either you accept the situation as it is or you may choose to leave. According to Kelly (1998), the signing of an employment contract is often used by the employers as a means to legitimize certain conditions, including conditions that might be perceived as dissatisfactory. In these situations, Kelly argues that the need for a leader to transform the feelings of discontent into feelings of injustice and a (possible) will to act is important. This particular informant, however, was employed in an industry with low degrees of union affiliation, combined with high degrees of competition between workers, which seems to have affected his position. Instead of collective action, he leans towards an exit-strategy.

Regarding class, it seems that (perceptions of one's) class background may be almost as important as current class position in the process of creating a class identity among the informants. Class background, particularly how the informants perceive it, also appears to have a strong influence on current attitudes towards industrial action. Although current class position matters in the sense that it affects the actual wages and working conditions, as shown in the results in the statistical analysis, class background, and (the occurrence or absence of) class identity, appears to have a stronger influence on perceptions of justice with regard to distributional patterns and wages among the informants, and accordingly also affects attitudes towards industrial action. This was particularly evident among the informants who maintained they grew up in a working class environment, but currently obtained a position they themselves defined as middle-class. The identification with a social class, both in terms of background and/or current situation, further appears to be related to broader political and ideological views, which was in several cases derived from the childhood environment. This in turn affects attitudes towards industrial action. As expressed by one informant:

Woman (26, middle-level white collar): I think that, spontaneously, I have always felt that the labour movement is something nice. How it has evolved and... That workers have improved their rights and that they have fought together for that. I think that, it is because of my background that I feel positively for that.

Growing up in an environment where political issues were discussed, particularly issues regarding the labor market and class, appears to have affected the informants' current perceptions of justice, and their attitudes towards industrial action. This was also evident when it came to personal experiences of (the effects of) class society. Experiences of inequalities and deprivation, related to class background, or a lack of these experiences, appear to have influenced the informants' worldviews and how they perceive the current society. One informant, for instance, discussed her experiences of growing up in an environment where "everyone's parents worked in home care services or in a factory" as constituting for why she felt it was important to fight for a more equal world, to which the use of industrial action was included. This was also related to later experiences of the informant, when relative deprivation became visible due to increased contact with more privileged groups in society. However, the informants who did not grow up in such an environment, and who had not experienced the contrasts between privileged and underprivileged groups during their youth, tended to present more negative attitudes towards industrial action, independent of current class position. As expressed by one informant, for instance:

Man (40, unskilled worker): I grew up in the north. Then there were no big differences between rich and poor. And so I didn't really think about those things. [...] I thought that most people were on the same level. [...] And, my parents, we never participated in any mayday demonstrations, they were not politically active. Had they been, maybe I would have thought of those things. But as a child I never did. We never discussed things like class, or things like that.

Even though he maintained that he had later on learned that in other places in Sweden the differences between classes was more obvious, the childhood environment appear to have affected his current perception of society, as well as his current view on justice and industrial action.

## Discussion

Five different variables present significant effect on attitudes towards industrial action in the statistical analysis: class, union membership, sector of employment, size of workplace and age. Gender and type of employment contract show no significant effect, and when controlled for wage the effect of age disappears. Out of the three mediating variables, wage and work influ-

ence also show significant effects while perceived ability to find a new job does not.

That union membership presents significant effect is not very surprising, since membership in a union in itself indicates positive attitudes towards collective mobilization and union activity. The result for sector of employment is more interesting. Although it is not very surprising that public sector employees have more positive attitudes towards industrial action than private sector employees considering the general wage gap between the two categories (Boye et al., 2014), it is interesting to find that statistically significant differences remain after controlling for both wage and work influence. Considering that the models also control for union membership and size of workplace, which is argued to generate higher union density in the public sector (Scheuer, 2011), the result becomes even more striking. One possible interpretation of this finding is that Swedish public sector employees to a higher degree than private sector employees belong to the ideological left (Berglund & Furåker, 2003; Svallfors, 2004). However, this interpretation cannot be controlled for in this analysis. The result for size of workplace is quite expected. Most previous studies present associations between size of workplace and union membership. Even if union membership is controlled for, it is likely that union activity in the workplace is more frequently occurring in larger workplaces than in smaller ones. The ability for union activists and leaders to mobilize and affect the employees' attitudes thus probably increases (cf. Kelly, 1998).

Age is another interesting variable in this analysis. Although the effect of age disappears when controlled for wage, the original finding that younger individuals present more positive attitudes towards industrial action than older individuals is quite surprising. In most studies investigating union organization, younger individuals are found to have a lower propensity than older individuals to be organized (Scheuer, 2011; Kjellberg, 2001, 2010). In contrast, the result in this study indicates that young employees are more militant than older employees. Thus, it appears that young individuals do not necessarily present negative attitudes towards collective action and the union *per se*.

As expected, the effect of class is strong. The categories unskilled and skilled workers present the most positive attitudes towards industrial action whereas the category higher-level white collar workers present the most negative attitudes. When controlled for wage and work influence, the effect of class is reduced. This indicates that material aspects of the working life affecting job (dis)satisfaction, which varies by class location, strongly affect attitudes towards industrial action. The results thus indicate that depending on class location, the (perceived) need to act collectively differs. However, not all of the variance between different class locations is explained by these factors. In the qualitative analysis, the results suggest that, among other aspects, perceptions and experiences of class background and class identifica-

tion, affecting one's perceptions of (in)justice, contribute to explain different attitudes towards industrial action as well. Particularly the perception of one's class background appears to be important in terms of shaping one's experiences and perceptions of inequalities and (in)justice, affecting the attitudes towards industrial action. Although material factors such as working conditions and wages are also highlighted as important factors shaping different attitudes towards industrial action, it appears that different strategies may be preferred in terms of handling job dissatisfaction, depending on social identification, perceptions of (in)justice and ideology. Because these factors also affect the view on the relationship between the employees and the employer, it appears that those who identify with their co-workers and view the employer as a counterpart responsible for solving work-related issues present more militant attitudes than those who possess a weaker identification with the co-workers, and who are also less likely to attribute responsibility to the employer. These individuals may instead choose individual strategies, such as individual negotiations or exit strategies instead of collective mobilization and industrial conflict (cf. Brown Johnson & Jarley, 2004). However, it may also be that union activity and presence at the workplace affect these different attitudes and strategies. That union activity in the workplace affects collective mobilization in terms of both union density and actual strike activity has been observed in previous studies (Törnqvist, 1994; Kjellberg, 2001; Waddington, 2014), and as argued in mobilization theory the leaders ability to mobilize members for industrial action is crucial (Kelly, 1998). The results in this study are ambiguous in this respect. Although it appears that individuals working in organizations where the union is more active present more positive attitudes towards industrial action and vice versa, none of the informants actually highlight the presence of union leaders as significant for their attitudes. In contrast, it seems that choosing strategically important issues to fight for has a stronger influence on the attitudes towards industrial action. Thus, instrumental reasons may be more significant in shaping individuals attitudes towards industrial action, along with social identification and ideological worldviews affecting perceptions of (in)justice.

## Conclusion

If attitudes towards industrial action are considered a proxy for the willingness to participate in industrial action, which in turn is an indication of the strength of a union movement, the results in this study indicate that the Swedish trade union movement in general and the LO federations in particular have access to quite strong power resources among their members in terms of potential mobilization for action. The analytical results in this study further indicate that class, both in terms of a material positions affecting power

relations between employees and employers and working conditions and influence, and in terms of social identification, play a central part in explaining different attitudes towards industrial action. In line with previous research (Brown Johnson & Jarley, 2004, p. 556; Buttigieg et al., 2008), the results further indicate that instrumentality (primarily in the sense of choosing to fight for the right issue), job dissatisfaction (in terms of both wages and working conditions) and group identification at the workplace help explain variation in attitudes towards industrial action, both within and between different class positions. However, the results also indicate that some of the variance that may not be explained by material factors related to job dissatisfaction appears to be related to class identification and (perceptions of) class background, further related to ideological views affecting both perceptions of (in)justice and attribution. As argued by Kelly (1998), attributing the employer is important in terms of collective mobilization. The results in this study indicate that the view of the relationship between employees and employers affecting attribution may lead to different strategies (individual or collective) in terms of how to address work-related dissatisfaction. Although union leaders, as indicated by previous research (Darlington, 2012), might have an impact in this respect, the results in this study indicate that when it comes to the formation of attitudes towards collective action, ideological views and social identification (both with co-workers and in terms of class) may be even more significant.

Finally, the link between union militancy and union density, discussed in the introduction, varies between countries. In Sweden, where union density has been relatively high for quite some time, this link has been less prominent compared with for instance the UK and the US (Kelly, 1998, p. 90; Kjellberg, 2001). However, since union density in Sweden has both fluctuated and declined in recent decades, union militancy might gain in importance. It may be seen as an issue of voice, i.e., member influence, and of instrumentality within the union, which has been highlighted as important for union growth in Sweden in previous research (Kjellberg, 2001).

## References

- Akkerman, A., Born, M. J. & Torenvlied, R. (2013). Solidarity, Strikes, and Scabs: How Participation Norms Affect Union Members' Willingness to Strike. *Work and Occupations*, 40, 250-280.
- Aspers, P. (2001). *Markets in Fashion. A Phenomenological Approach*. City University Press: Stockholm.
- Bengtsson, M. (2008). *Individen stämplar in: arbetet, facket och lönen i sociologisk belysning*. Diss. Göteborg : Göteborgs universitet.
- Berglund, T. & Furåker, B. (2003). Are the Unions Still Needed? Employees' Views of their Relations to Unions and Employers. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 24, 573-594.
- Bergholm, T. & Beiler, A. (2013). Globalization and the erosion of the Nordic model: A Swedish-Finnish comparison. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 19, 55-70.
- Boye, K., Halldén, K. & Magnusson, C. (2014). Könslönegapets utveckling. Betydelsen av yrkets kvalifikationsnivå och familjeansvar. In M. Evertsson & C. Magnusson (Eds.), *Ojämlighetens dimensioner. Uppväxtvillkor, arbete och hälsa i Sverige (pp. 185-211)*. Liber: Stockholm.
- Brandl, B. & Traxler, T. (2009). Labour Conflicts: A Cross-national Analysis of Economic and Institutional Determinants, 1971-2002. *European Sociological Review*, 26, 519-540.
- Brown Johnson, N. & Jarley, P. (2004). Justice and Union Participation: An Extension and Test of Mobilization Theory. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 42(3), 543-562.
- Buttigieg, D. M., Deery, S. J. & Iverson, R. D. (2008). Union Mobilization: A Consideration of the Factors Affecting the Willingness of Union Members to Take Industrial Action. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 46, 248-267.
- Checchi, D. & Visser, J. (2005). Pattern Persistence in European Trade Union Density: A longitudinal analysis 1950-1996. *European Sociological Review*, 21, 1-21.
- Darlington, R. (2012). The interplay of structure and agency dynamics in strike activity. *Employee Relations*, 34, 518-533.
- Deery, S. & Walsh, J. (1999). The Decline of Collectivism? A Comparative Study of White-Collar Employees in Britain and Australia. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 37(2), 245-269.
- Fosh, P. (1993). Membership Participation Work-place Unionism: The Possibility of Union Renewal. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 31(4), 577-592.
- Frege, C. M. & Kelly, J. (2003). Union Revitalization Strategies in Comparative Perspective. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 9, 7-24.

- Gall, G. (2013). Quiescence continued? Recent strike activity in nine Western European economies. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 34, 667-691. doi: 10.1177/0143831X12453956
- Godard, J. (2011). What Has Happened to Strikes? *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 49, 282-305.
- Grape, L., Goding, I., Fransson, A., Forssell, Å. & Larsson, M. (2007). *Röster om facket och jobbet. Sammanfattning och slutsatser – klass och kön*. Stockholm: LO.
- Gumbrell-McCormick, R. & Hyman, R. (2013). *Trade unions in Western Europe: Hard times, hard choices*. Oxford University Press.
- Harding, D. J. & Seefeldt, K. S. (2013). Mixed Methods and Causal Analysis. In S. L. Morgan (Ed.), *Handbook of Causal Analysis for Social Research* (pp. 91-110). Springer: Netherlands.
- Haslam, S. A. & Veenstra, K. (2000). Willingness to participate in industrial protest: Exploring social identification in context. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 39(2), 153-172.
- Hyman, R. (1972.) *Strikes*. London: Sage.
- Hyman, R. (2001). *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between market, Class and Society*. London: Sage.
- Hyman, R. (2007). How can trade unions act strategically? Transfer: *European Review of Labour and Research*, 13, 193-210.
- Kelly, J. (1997). The future of trade unionism: injustice, identity and attribution. *Employee Relations*, 19(5), 400-414.
- Kelly, J. (1998). *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves*. London: Routledge.
- Kjellberg, A. (2001). *Fackliga organisationer och medlemmar i dagens Sverige*. Lund: Arkiv.
- Kjellberg, A. (2009). Det fackliga medlemsraset I Sverige under 2007 och 2008. *Arbetsmarknad & Arbetsliv*, 15(2), 11-28.
- Kjellberg, A. (2010). Kollektivavtalens täckningsgrad samt organisationsgraden hos arbetsgivarförbund och fackförbund. *Studies in Social Policy, Industrial Relations, Working Life and Mobility Research Reports 2010:1* (updated 2013-02-12). Lund: Lund University, Department of Sociology.
- Korpi, W. (1981). Sweden: Conflict, Power and Politics in Industrial Relations. In P. B. Doeringer (Ed.), *Industrial Relations in International Perspective: Essays on Research and Policy*, (pp. 185-217). London: The MacMillan Press LTD.
- Korpi, W. (1985). *Handling, resurser och makt: om kausala och finala förklaringsmodeller i maktanalys*. Stockholm: Inst. för social forskning.
- Martin, J. (1986). Predictors of Individual Propensity to Strike. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 39(2), 214-227.



- McClendon, J. M. & Klaas, B. (1993). Determinants of Strike-Related Militancy: An Analysis of a University Faculty Strike. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 46(3), 560-573.
- Moran-Ellis, J., Alexander, V. D., Cronin, A., Dickinson, M., Fielding, J., Sleney, J. & Thomas, H. (2006). Triangulation and integration: processes, claims and implications. *Qualitative Research*, 6, 45-59.
- Narisada, A. & Schieman, S. (2016). Underpaid but Satisfied: The Protective Functions of Security. *Work and Occupations*, 43(2), 215-255.
- Pontusson, J. (2013). Unionization, inequality and redistribution. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 51(4), 797-825.
- Svallfors, S. (2004). *Klassamhällets kollektiva medvetande: klass och attityder I jämförande perspektiv*. Umeå: Boréa.
- Thelan, K. (2001). Varieties of Labor Politics in the Developed Democracies. In P. A. Hall & D. Soskice (Eds.), *Varieties of Capitalism. The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage* (pp. 71-103). Oxford University Press: New York.
- Thörnqvist, C. (2007). From blue-collar wildcats to public sector resistance at the turn of a new millennium. Strikes in Sweden 1970-2005. In S. van der Velden, H. Dribbusch, D. Lyddon & K. Vandaele (Eds.), *Strikes around the world, 1968-2005* (p. 321). Amsterdam: Aksant.
- Thörnqvist, C. (1994.) *Arbetarna lämnar fabriken. Strejkrörelser i Sverige under efterkrigstiden, deras bakgrund, förlopp och följder*. Göteborg: Historiska institutionen Göteborgs universitet.
- Visser, J. (2002). Why Fewer Workers Join Unions in Europe: A Social Custom Explanation of Membership Trends. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 40, 403-430.
- Western, B. (1997). *Between Class and Market – Post-war Unionization in the Capitalist Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wright, E. O. (1997). *Class Counts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Department of Sociology Working Paper Series

Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

[www.su.se](http://www.su.se) | [info@su.se](mailto:info@su.se) | ISSN 2002-7729

