Left-of-Centre Parties and Trade Unions in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by
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and
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The relationship between the Swedish Social Democrats and trade unions has traditionally been an intimate one, at least in comparative terms (Epstein 1967, 149–50). The social democratic party SAP (Socialdemokratiska arbetarföreningen) and the Trade Union Confederation LO (Landsorganisationen) were powerful organizations, and they constitute the prototype of a successful historical cooperation between parties and unions. SAP, founded in 1889, was the driving force behind the establishment of an umbrella organization for trade unions in Sweden. Ever since, the two organizations have been seen as ‘two branches of the same tree’. When the labour movement fragmented in many other countries in the 1910s and 1920s, LO ensured its members remained well-behaved social democrats (Jansson 2012, 2013). Collective affiliation to the party was practiced for local union sections. National unions made large grants to the national party and, as in Britain, furnished much of the campaign apparatus at election time.

Social democracy did extremely well in Sweden during most of the twentieth century: union density was high; SAP governed Sweden for forty-four years in a row (1932–76); and the corporatist system introduced during the first half of the twentieth century gave extensive powers to the union movement and the employers’ organization. The 1950s and 1960s was the ‘golden age’ of social democracy: Sweden experienced full employment, the welfare state system expanded, comprehensive all-inclusive social insurance schemes were introduced, and wage inequality was actively combatted. Cooperation ran smoothly between the party and the trade union movement.

Since the 1970s, however, this happy marriage has undergone several crises due to economic, social, and political changes. The corporatist system has
declined. As in other Western European countries, the working class has shrunk in size. Voting patterns among union members have changed. Although union density is comparatively high in Sweden, union density has declined in the working class. These structural changes challenge the traditional cooperation between SAP and LO and call for a re-examination of party–union links.

FROM SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION TO ‘THE WAR OF THE ROSES’

An important component of SAP’s traditional success was its cooperation with LO. Institutional settings in Sweden have also worked in favour of such cooperation: Sweden is a unitary state, and has parliamentary governments and a proportional election system. SAP’s and LO’s common history has been considered a successful exchange of resources (Allern et al. 2007; Öberg 1994): SAP has been able to offer access to government and could thus implement social and labour market policies favoured by LO. LO, on the other hand, had the resources to mobilize its members to vote for SAP; it also had financial resources to contribute to the party.

One key component for the social democratic dominance, and possibly an effect of party–union alignment (Padgett and Paterson 1991, 178), was the cooperation between LO and the employers’ organization that began in the 1930s and ensured peaceful labour market relations. The 1920s had been chaotic, with innumerable labour market conflicts which affected the whole economy. When SAP won the elections in the 1930s, the government threatened both sides that it would legislate on wages unless they could agree on a model for solving labour market conflicts. As a result, LO, which had previously advocated free collective bargaining—wages should not be dependent on the will of parliament or the state but decided solely by agreements between unions and employers—concluded a labour market agreement with the employers’ organization in 1938 which became the start of a very long period of peace. During this time, the corporatist system was developed. The institutionalized cooperation between interest groups and the state resulted in representation on government agencies’ boards for both LO and the employers’ organization.

Cooperation ran smoothly until the 1970s and especially the 1980s. LO radicalized and pressured the party to legislate both on workplace democracy (increasing employees’ impact on working conditions) and on wage-earner funds (meant to distribute the profits of Swedish industry between employers and employees). The funds came to be very controversial, even among social
democrats (Johansson and Magnusson 2012, chapter 6; Lewin 2002, chapter 9). These internal disagreements, known as ‘the war of the roses’—a reference to the party symbol, the rose (Englund 1984)—continued into the next decade.

But if LO was the dominant partner in the relationship in the 1970s and 1980s, this changed in the wake of the economic crisis in the 1990s. The crisis has been compared to the depression in the 1920s and struck Sweden very hard (Magnusson 2006, 24). Not only was the union movement, like the party, shocked by the unemployment rate (the highest since the 1920s), the employers’ organization had decided only a few years earlier to leave the corporatist system, forcing the union movement to do the same (Johansson 2000). Moreover, SAP was in opposition when the economic crisis started and this probably gave LO unrealistic expectations about what a social democratic government actually could and would do. When, then, the party won the 1994 general election, cracks in party–union cooperation became more and more visible. Ever since SAP adopted Keynesianism in the 1930s, the primary goal had been to fight unemployment (often at the expense of inflation), and this is almost certainly what LO assumed that SAP would continue doing. Instead, SAP abandoned Keynesianism and unemployment became secondary to fighting inflation, as Minister of Finance Göran Persson (who in 1995 was elected party leader) became the engineer of the social democrats’ new policy. As a consequence the relationship between the party and the union movement grew decidedly chilly (Persson and Kask 1997; Johansson and Magnusson 2012, chapter 11).

For many years, LO members were collectively affiliated to SAP. In 1908 a decision was made to affiliate local union sections to the party (Casparsson 1947, 144–55). It required an active act from the member to renounce his or her party membership. The SAP’s opponents tried their best to make an issue of its collective affiliation with LO, with both the right-wing parties and the left-wing VP (Vänsterpartiet) party questioning the system. From VP’s perspective, the formalized relationship between SAP and LO was an obstacle to its own closer cooperation with LO. When VP and the right-wing parties threatened to legislate against collective affiliation in 1985, SAP decided to abolish the system from 31 December 1990 onwards (RD 1990/91:KU40; Socialdemokraterna 1986; Vänsterpartiet-kommunisterna 1988). Abolition triggered profound changes in the SAP membership. Following it, the proportion of party members coming from LO has decreased, which has had two possible impacts on party–union relations. First, research suggests that LO members’ involvement in the party’s ‘ordinary’ party work in local party associations is no longer as common. Second, the party is not impacted by LO to the extent that it used to be when LO members were active in the party and could use their membership to make the party engage in issues important to LO. Research has suggested that ‘a newer generation’ of party members with
higher education, and white rather than blue collars, is changing the party
(Aylott 2003).

It is not only the party’s membership structure which has changed since the
1990s. So, too, has LO’s. As is the case elsewhere, the working class has become
a shrinking proportion of all employees, which further undermines LO’s
position. Traditionally strong industries like mining and the metal industry
are not major employers anymore. Instead working-class occupations are now
found in the service sector in jobs that are often insecure and part time, which
makes it harder for the unions to organize them (Magnusson 2000; Allern
et al. 2007). And while union density has been comparatively high in Sweden,
it has nevertheless dropped: in 1993 it reached 85 per cent, but has, especially
after the centre-right government entered office in 2006, rapidly decreased and
today stands at just 70 per cent (Medlingsinstitutet 2016, 46). High density has
been explained by unions’ presence at workplace level, and the structure of the
unemployment insurance. The latter has been administered by unions, and up
to 1998 union membership was necessary in order to receive insurance
(Rothstein 1992; Kjellberg 2001, 26–38). This is not the case today, and the
trend is that workers are less eager to join unions. White-collar unions, on the
other hand, are experiencing the opposite pattern: union density among
white-collar workers and professional employees has increased in recent
years. Today these groups are organized by two organizations—TCO and
Saco—but neither of these organizations has had any formalized cooperation
with a political party. Indeed, claiming neutrality and maintaining some
distance from the labour movement, especially LO, has been a strategy for
member recruitment (Nilsson 1985, 121ff.; Bergstrand 2003; Strand 2013).

Despite some changes in the links between SAP and LO, research on party–
union relations in Sweden has shown that the ties between the two branches
persisted during the first years of the new millennium (Aylott 2003; Allern
et al. 2007). What is the state of affairs some ten years later?

**LINKS BETWEEN PARTIES AND UNIONS TODAY**

Sweden has two traditional left parties represented in the parliament: the
social democrats, SAP and the left party, VP. Because VP did not respond to
our survey, the information on its relationship with the unions is solely based
on the latters’ answers. Parties’ groups in the Riksdag do not have independ-
ence from the central party organizations. Indeed, SAP is known for its
disciplined MPs (Barrling Hermansson 2004; Davidsson 2006). There have
always been personnel overlaps between the parliamentary party group and
the central party organization, and in 2010 a decision was made to collapse the
two units into one. The union movement in Sweden is strictly divided into
three different umbrella organizations: the trade union confederation for blue-collar workers, LO, currently has 1.5 million members (Landsorganisationen 2014b), TCO (Tjänstemännens centralorganisation), the Swedish Confederation for Professional Employees, organizes white-collar workers and has 1.2 million members (TCO 2013), and Saco (Sveriges akademikers centralorganisation), the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations, organizes professional employees with a college degree and has 650,000 members (Saco 2013b). Apart from LO, TCO, and Saco there is yet another union organization in Sweden, the syndicalist union SAC (Sveriges arbetares centralorganisation), which organizes anyone but which has been very small and marginalized since the 1940s.

Overlapping Organizational Structures

After the abolition of collective affiliation in 1990 there are no longer any statutory links between parties and unions in Sweden. Local union associations still can affiliate with the local party organization, if an active decision to do so is taken, but this is not very common (Landsorganisationen 2013). That said, one important statutory link—not covered by framework for the comparative study—still exists. The Social Democratic Youth League (SSU, Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Ungdomsförbund), which is social democracy’s political youth organization in Sweden, is LO’s and SAP’s common political youth organization (Landsorganisationen 2014a). Thus young party members are socialized into an organizational culture in which cooperation between the union movement and the party is a natural part.

Reciprocal and Durable Inter-organizational Links

There are multiple durable and reciprocal inter-organizational links between SAP and LO, and overall they suggest a high degree of institutionalization and something close to an integrated relationship. First and foremost, we see that there is a tacit agreement about representation in decision-making bodies, the most important one being LO’s representation in the party’s executive committee and the board. The president of LO is and has always been one of the ordinary members of SAP’s national executive committee (VU, verkställande utskottet) and the party board (partistyrelsen). This order is not formally established in the party’s statues. The party board is elected by the party congress and is the decision-making body between the congresses. Aside from the LO president, a number of union chairmen (at the moment three) also have seats on the party board (Landsorganisationen 2013; Socialdemokraterna 2013a, 14f.). These practices of representation in the party give LO great insight
into and influence over how the party is run. The link is however not reciprocal: the party has no such representation in LO. Historically, the party board has had members with posts in TCO as well.

Moreover, SAP and LO have frequent day-to-day contacts, both through formal committees (see Table 11.1) and informal contacts. The party’s Socialdemokraternas Fackliga Utskott (SFU), the Trade Union Committee, is one of the formal committees where representatives from LO and the party meet on a regular basis. The party secretary (in charge of organizational issues) and the second in command from LO are represented in the SFU. In addition to the SFU, there are several other party committees in which LO has representation, for instance the permanent committees on social insurance, economy, EU-related issues, and the metal and mining industries (Socialdemokraterna 2009b, 106; Landsorganisationen 2013; Thörn 2013; Socialdemokraterna 2014, 128). Besides the permanent committees there are temporary committees for handling current political issues, and LO is usually represented in these as well (Socialdemokraterna 2009b, 106; Socialdemokraterna 2014, 128). Permanent Trade Union Committees also exist at the regional and local level in the party organization (Aylott 2003; Socialdemokraterna 2013a). Another permanent forum where both organizations meet is the so-called workplace party–union associations set up by SAP to compensate for membership losses due to the abolition of collective affiliation, of which there were 515 in 2008 (Socialdemokraterna 1970, 25; Socialdemokraterna 2009a, 7). Joint campaigns as well as joint conferences are also common, especially during election years.

The inter-organizational links between SAP and the other unions, TCO and Saco, have different characteristics. The white-collar unions and the professionals are very eager to stress that they are independent from all political parties. Because of this, contacts through joint campaigns or joint committees are unthinkable. TCO has pointed out a number of times that it would welcome increased cooperation with LO, but LO’s relationship with SAP prevents such mobilization of members in joint campaigns (Martos Nilsson 2012). From SAP’s point of view, however, the white-collar workers and the upper middle class are important groups for the party, and have been since as far back as the 1940s (Przeworski and Sprague 1986). Attempts to tie these groups to the party resulted in Tjänstemannarådet, a council for input from these groups. The main aim was to encourage formation of white-collar party associations (Svensson 1994, 102f.). Because of the structural changes to the labour market from the 1960s onwards, SAP has repeatedly tried to improve relations with the service sector employees, with TCO the main target for such strategies. Different measures have been taken: SAP tried to establish workplace party associations; courses for white-collar workers were arranged at the LO school in Brunnsvik; representatives from the white-collar trade unions were invited to different meetings with the party, both formal and informal; and conferences were arranged.
Table 11.1. Reciprocal, durable inter-organizational links between party central organization/legislative group and union confederation, last five years (c.2008–13)\(^1\)

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<tr>
<th>Party-confederation dyad—CPO</th>
<th>SAP-LO</th>
<th>SAP-TCO</th>
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<th>VP-LO</th>
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1 ‘P/U’ indicates responses from party/trade union questionnaires, ‘CJ’ signifies the authors’ ‘coded judgment’ based on alternative sources in cases of diverging or missing P/U answers. ‘c.d.’ means contradictory data (diverging P/U answers), ‘n.d.’ means no data (informant didn’t know/missing/unclear), and ‘n.a.’ means not applicable in this case.
None of the union confederations currently cooperates with the left party. Nevertheless, VP considers unions important, and the strategy towards unions has been to influence the union movement through encouraging its members to become active union members (Vänsterpartiet 2004; Jansson 2012; Vänsterpartiet 2012).

One-way and Occasional Inter-organizational Links

As was the case with the formal, institutionalized links, there are multiple one-way, occasional links between LO and SAP (see Table 11.2a and 11.2b). In fact, both organizations have claimed that they are cooperating in every possible way listed in the survey. LO is always invited to SAP’s congress and SAP is also invited to LO’s congress. SAP is also invited to all LO affiliates’ congresses, and the party seems to take part in as many congresses as possible (Olofsson 1979, 162ff.; Socialdemokraterna 2014, 121f.).

Informal one-way and occasional links between TCO and SAP as well as between Saco and SAP are, however, also quite common. The most common form of links between the party and TCO are meetings arranged by either SAP or TCO for information exchange. SAP has a TCO network which aims at increasing contacts between TCO and SAP’s members of parliament. Until 2013 these forms of cooperation were mainly information exchange between SAP and TCO through meetings. In 2013 a different strategy for cooperation was developed by SAP, which now directs its efforts towards TCO affiliates instead of TCO. Eleven SAP MPs are responsible for contacts with one TCO-union each (Socialdemokraterna 2014, 65).

Invitations to the SAP congress are also sent to TCO and Saco. Because of the lack of formal positions in the party, TCO and Saco have no mandate to influence its debates and discussions. One should bear in mind, though, that even if the congress takes decisions on the overall policy orientation of the party and its programme, this is not a closed forum: the debates are always broadcast on national TV. Thus, attending the congress does not imply support for SAP on the part of TCO or Saco but it is a good forum for networking. TCO and Saco also invite SAP to their congresses, but they invite other political parties too (Saco 2013a).

All the unions have stressed that they invite other political parties to meetings for information exchange and cooperation, and the four centre-right parties that formed the Swedish government in 2006–14 were a natural target for all unions’ attempts to impact politics. Some of the respondents emphasized, however, that they do not cooperate with the xenophobic party, Sweden Democrats. Among the unions, SAC stands out, having declared that it does not believe in or support political parties; consequently it is completely isolated from them.
Table 11.2a. One-way, occasional links at the organizational level between party central organization and union confederation, last five years (c.2008–13)\(^1\)

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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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Table 11.2b. One-way, occasional links at the organizational level between legislative group and union confederation, last five years (c.2008–13)\(^1\)

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<th>SAP-LO</th>
<th>SAP-TCO</th>
<th>SAP-Saco</th>
<th>SAP-SAC</th>
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<tr>
<td>Invitations to party to special consultative arrangements initiated by the organization</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) ‘P/U’ indicates responses from party/trade union questionnaires, ‘C/J’ signifies the authors’ ‘coded judgment’ based on alternative sources in cases of diverging or missing P/U answers. ‘c.d.’ means contradictory data (diverging P/U answers), ‘n.d.’ means no data (informant didn’t know/missing/unclear), and ‘n.a.’ means not applicable in this case.
Sweden’s political elite is small, and so is the elite in the labour movement, and we can find both personnel overlaps and personal ties between the different organizations. Although there has never been a formalized procedure in which the party has earmarked a certain number of seats in the parliament, it is a fact that a large proportion of SAP MPs has had a background in the union movement. With one exception (August Lindberg 1936–47) LO’s president was an MP for SAP until 1983 when LO President Stig Malm refused to enter parliament despite pressure from the party (Hansson 1936–9; Norberg et al. 1985–92; Pauli 2012, 60).

Figures 11.1a and 11.1b present an estimate of SAP MPs’ and VP MPs’ connections to the union movement. In 2010, 8 per cent of SAP MPs had a background in LO or one of LO’s affiliates on the national level—a share which, compared to 1970, has decreased. Moreover, in 1970 the LO president, three LO union chairmen, and three former chairmen (of which one came from TCO) were MPs. There are no SAP MPs that have worked for either TCO or Saco in 2010, neither do we find any chairmen among the MPs. Among the left party’s MPs, 10 per cent (two people) have held positions in unions at the national level in 2010; in both cases the unions have been white-collar and upper middle class unions.

Figure 11.1. Share of SAP and VP MPs that hold or have held positions as officials or staff in the confederations of unions at the national or local level.\(^1\)

\(^{1}\) Only permanent representatives and deputy representatives who attend the entire term are included. ‘n.d.’ means no data (missing). N of MPs is 204 for SAP and 4 for VP in 1970, 112 for SAP and 19 for VP in 2010.

\(^{2}\) The figures from 1970 are from 1 January 1970, hence before the abolition of the bicameral system.

Sources: Norberg et al. (1985–92); Riksdagen (2011); SCB (1970), <http://www.riksdagen.se>.
If we look at the regional and local level, the figures are higher for both SAP and VP. The trend is the same as on the national level; SAP MPs have backgrounds in LO whereas VP MPs have a background in Saco. The share of MPs with an LO background has somewhat decreased over time. VP’s engagement in the professional and white-collar unions is hardly surprising: out of the nineteen MPs VP had between 2010 and 2014, fourteen MPs had a university degree, two of the MPs were students, and the remaining three MPs had working-class occupations (and two of those three held, or had held, the position of party leader).

Other kinds of personal overlaps and transfers between the parties and the unions also exist. In 2012, Stefan Löfven was elected party leader of SAP. Löfven, who at the time was the president of the Metal Workers’ Union, became the first LO leader to become party leader in the history of the party. Not even during the heyday of the union movement was the party leader recruited from LO. The career path to the party’s top job has, with few exceptions, been through the youth organization SSU. The same year, LO also elected a new president: Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson, who not only had a background in the Metal Workers’ Union but was also the leader of the SSU in the 1990s. The appointments of Löfven and Thorwaldsson indicate how intertwined LO and SAP still are.

Although TCO’s links to SAP have not been formal, there have been links through personnel—all TCO presidents except two have had positions in SAP, either at the national level or at the municipal level (including the present president). Two of them have had ministerial posts in social democratic governments (Björn Rosengren and Lennart Bodström). After the elections 2014, Löfven formed a government and appointed Annika Strandhäll minister of social security. Strandhäll was at the time chairman of the TCO union Vision. Political ‘neutrality’ has been a contested issue in TCO throughout its history, and claiming neutrality has at some points been difficult (Westerlund 2011, 191–6). However, SAP is not the only party that has recruited TCO leaders to ministerial posts. The minister for employment in the 2010–14 centre-right government, Hillevi Engström, came from the Swedish Police Union (a TCO-affiliated union) before she became minister. Engström’s and Strandhäll’s ministerial posts do not necessarily imply that TCO is engaging in party politics; rather, it tells us how important it is for the political parties to cooperate with TCO.

**Overall Degree of Closeness and Range**

From the analysis we can distinguish between three sets of dyads regarding the degree of closeness: one dyad where the party and the union has an intimate relationship (SAP-LO), a group of dyads with a number of occasional links
(SAP-TCO, SAP-Saco, and VP’s relation to the unions), and two dyads where there are no contacts between parties and union, namely SAP-SAC and VP-SAC. Figures 11.2a and 11.2b illustrate all this, and shows that the SAP-LO extra-parliamentary relationship obtain a high total organizational score, yet a few points lower than the theoretical maximum due to no statutory links as defined here.

These results conform fairly well to the organizations’ own evaluations of the degree of closeness (see Figure 11.3). Both SAP and LO describe their relationship as integrated despite the important changes that have taken place over the years, and the total link scores indicate a close relationship, although not a completely integrated one; there are no formal overlapping structures any more. However, LO still has representation in SAP’s national executive committee, which gives it privileged access to the party leadership and thereby a great opportunity to influence party decision-making. The internal disputes in the party between 2008 and 2012 highlight the difficulties for any SAP leader trying to act without support from LO. After being in office for twelve years in a row, SAP lost the elections in 2006. In the election campaign of 2010 the social-democratic party leader Mona Sahlin declared that, if victorious, SAP would govern together with the Green Party. Choosing to cooperate with

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1 The theoretical maximum link score is 20 for the CPO-dyads and 12 for LPG-dyads since some link items are unlikely to apply to the legislative party group and were thus not included in this part of the survey. However, when comparing dyads involving CPOs with those involving LPGs, one should still keep in mind that the latter’s maximum involves fewer links than the former’s top scores.

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Figure 11.2. Total link scores of central party organization–trade union relationships and legislative party–trade union relationships (0–20/0–12).
the Green Party was an attempt to win the well-educated middle class, but it did not appeal to LO members. On the contrary, some of the Greens’ goals, such as taxes on emissions and gas, were not compatible with the goals of the industrial sector, and were even considered a direct threat to employment in them. Several of the LO-affiliated unions’ chairmen and retired chairmen openly declared that they preferred cooperation with VP. So did one of the party’s most influential districts. A few days after the announcement, Sahlin had to invite VP into government too, suggesting to many that the SAP had given in to pressure from LO (Andersson 2008; DN 2008a; DN 2008b; Rudén and Häggström 2008; Johansson and Pettersson 2009; SVT 2014).

In the end SAP lost the 2010 election anyway. Indeed, the result was the worst result for SAP since the introduction of universal suffrage. According to the party’s own analysis, giving in to the wishes of LO to include VP in the government was a fatal mistake; the voters did not want the left party in the government (Socialdemokraterna 2010; Oscarsson and Holmberg 2011; SVT 2014; Sydsvenskan 2014). Sahlin resigned as party leader, triggering a period of extreme turbulence. The left faction and the right faction in the party more or less publicly fought each other. In a party that had a tradition of leaders staying in office for between one and three decades, Sahlin’s replacement, Håkan Juholt, managed less than a year in office, with meddling by LO cited by some as a factor in his resignation (Löfven 2012; Suhonen 2014). The chaotic situation ended in 2012 when Löfven was elected party leader with the support of LO even though he was considered something of a conservative—a stance which therefore made him something of a compromise candidate. Even if we have seen the end of statutory links—overlapping organizational

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Figure 11.3. Rating of overall degree of closeness/distance (average score) between the party and union confederation, last five years (c.2008–13).1

1 The VP-LO, VP-TCO, and VP-Saco ratings reflect the union’s rating only since VP did not answer the survey.
structures—the crisis in the party revealed LO’s influence over it. In light of this, it is not surprising that both SAP and LO have rated the relationship as integrated.

**EXPLAINING CONSTRAINED DECLINE AND TODAY’S PARTY–UNION LINKS**

How can we understand contemporary links between left-of-centre parties and unions? To some researchers, party–union relations can be seen as a game between actors that exchange resources (see Chapter 1 in this volume). Accordingly, party–union relations can be explained by actors’ access to resources that the other actors covet (Öberg et al. 2011). In order to explain SAP’s relation to LO we therefore need to examine what resources SAP and LO hold and what resources they want.

The resources offered by the unions to parties have traditionally been mobilization of voters and financial contributions. Sweden has a system of state subventions to political parties, and these subventions form the largest source of income for the country’s political parties (Riksdagen 2015). But Sweden also lacks transparency regarding private contributions to parties. There are no regulations regarding private contributions, and the parties were until very recently not even obliged to record where their funding came from. SAP received between 20–25 million SEK (2–2.6 million euros) a year in 2008–12 (Socialdemokraten 2013b; 2013c). The left party received less than 1 million SEK (100,000 euros) during 2013, the whole of it coming from individual sympathizers (Vänsterpartiet 2013).

Among the Swedish unions, LO and its affiliated unions are the only organizations that provide financial resources to a political party. LO donates 0.33 SEK per member/month to SAP which amounts to 6 million SEK/year (approximately 690,000 euros). During election years the party receives more. The affiliates have traditionally also paid an annual sum per member to SAP. LO strongly recommends that its affiliates give to the party, and the recommended sum is 6 SEK (0.6 euros) per member per year (Landsorganisationen 2013). It is however unclear if and how many of the affiliates actually pay, since most of the unions do not share such information. Ten out of fourteen LO affiliates have budget lines in their accounts which would suggest contributions to the party; the remaining four have not published their annual reports (Elektrikerna 2010; Handels 2010; Kommunal 2011; Byggnads 2012; Fastighets 2012; HRF 2012; Livs 2013; Seko 2013; Transport 2013; Metall 2014).

Mobilizing members to vote for the party is claimed to be one of the most important resources in a resource exchange model. Historically, class voting
has been strong in Sweden. As in other Western countries it has, however, declined over time due to structural changes: the working class has declined rapidly (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2011, 87).

In the 2010 and the 2014 elections support for the xenophobic right-wing populist party Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) increased among LO members (Oscarsson 2016). Altogether, approximately 60 per cent of the LO members vote for SAP or VP (Figure 11.4). Compared to the 1950s and 1960 this is far from impressive, and LO members are no longer the reliable constituency they once were. There are several explanations put forward for this, among them the perception that the ideological differences between the parties are smaller and that SAP is no longer a ‘working-class party’. But whatever the true cause, and given how the working class is shrinking, SAP’s share of its voters is not sufficient to win elections any more.

Joint activities such as campaigns and conferences were unproblematic for the union movement as long as a larger majority of union members voted for SAP. However, the changes among the union members’ political preferences make these arrangements more difficult. Surveys on LO members’ attitudes towards cooperation with SAP indicate two contradictory trends (see Figure 11.5): on the one hand, the number of LO members critical of trade union–party cooperation has increased over time; on the other hand, so has the number of LO members who feel positive about cooperation with SAP.

All of the LO-affiliated unions (except the Musicians Union, but this could be due to sparse material) claim that they support and cooperate with SAP, but very few of them have such declarations in their statues anymore. Only one LO affiliate, the Transport Workers’ Union, mentions cooperation with VP. In the

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**Figure 11.4.** LO, TCO, and Saco members voting for SAP (%).

*Sources: Oscarsson and Holmberg (2011: 93); SCB (2008: 312 f.)*
annual report from 2013 the union declared that it has ‘a wide political cooperation’ with the SAP, the Green Party, and the Left Party (Transport 2013, 5). Traditionally, cooperation with the former Communist Party has been very controversial. Lately, however, more LO affiliates have softened their stance towards VP, and in 2009 VP’s party leader was invited for the first time ever to speak at the congress of an LO union, the Union of Service and Communication Employees (SEKOväst 2009). VP has also sided with LO on high-profile issues where SAP and LO have been in disagreement.

On the other side of the exchange-model’s ledger, political parties can offer unions access to government. SAP has historically been very successful in Swedish elections. Consequently, close cooperation with the party has been useful to LO. However, in the past twenty years the scene has changed. SAP has steadily won a smaller and smaller proportion of votes. The party was in opposition between 2006 and 2014—in its experience, anyway, an unusually long time. Even though the party formed a coalition government with the Green Party after the elections of 2014, the election was far from a triumph for SAP, which received only 31 per cent of the votes.

How well, then, does the exchange model explain the party–union relationship? Access to resources has changed for both actors the past thirty years, which could be an explanation for the changes in the links that have taken place. But despite these changes the organizations still cooperate and the links...
are multifarious. The troublesome years 2010–12 indicate that, even though resources have decreased, the organizations are still integrated, which suggests that party–union relations are not only based on an exchange of resources: common history and shared organizational culture also play a part.

CONCLUSION

No one questions the importance of the links between SAP and LO for Swedish politics during the twentieth century, and according to this study the relationship seems to be fairly stable over time, and is without doubt still of great political significance. One important party–union link has disappeared the past thirty years, namely collective affiliation. The impact of its abolition on SAP’s membership has been profound. Yet the relationship appears to be vital despite changes in social, economic, and institutional settings. Moreover, there are still personnel overlaps between LO and SAP, and LO still has representation on the party’s board and executive committee. The support from LO, in terms of financial resources and manpower during election campaigns, is very important for SAP. There are, then, precious few signs that the links between SAP and LO are about to end any time soon.

But the party also needs to win voters among white-collar workers and employees with a college degree. As in other countries, the working class in Sweden is shrinking due to changes in the economy. Consequently it has become increasingly important for political parties to cooperate with white-collar unions. White-collar workers are well organized in Sweden; union density among these groups exceeds that achieved by LO. In the past, SAP has successfully formulated a political agenda that appealed to both the working class and the middle class, but since the 1990s it has struggled to do so. One measure taken by the Löfven government was to recruit ministers and staff to the government’s office from TCO after the SAP’s election victory in 2014. Considering the volatility of Swedish voters, and the size of the white-collar unions, links to these unions will be increasingly important for any political party in Sweden. It remains to be seen whether the SAP’s continuing close connection to LO will constitute an obstacle to the party’s pursuit of politics that appeal to these groups.

NOTES

1. The decision to collapse the CPO and LPG into one unit took place in 2010 after the party lost the elections, and the CPO physically moved to the parliament building in
late 2013/beginning of 2014. Note, however, that our questionnaire was sent to two different respondents who replied on behalf of the CPO and Riksdagsgrupp respectively, and that it covers the period 2006–13.

2. A table is not presented as there were no ‘yes values’ (coded judgments).

3. I collected the data from the personal webpages of the 112 SAP MPs and the twenty-nine VP MPs during the term 2010–14. I have also used the book published by the Swedish parliament every new mandate period in which every single MP is presented. In some cases I have also checked personal blogs. That said, there are several caveats. First, there is no systematic information on all members of parliament, only whatever information the MPs themselves deem interesting to share. Thus, while some have presented extensive information, others have presented very little. Second, some have indicated that they have had positions or worked for the unions but without specifying where. In such cases I have assumed that these persons have worked on a regional or local level since this is the most common form of union work. Overall, the figures are likely to be an underestimate rather than an overestimate—especially the figures on local union work. The data for 1970 were collected from the biographical encyclopaedias of Swedish MPs, 1867–1970.