



Industrial relations and social dialogue
**Sweden: Developments in
working life 2022**

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Eurofound reference number: WPEF23029

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Introduction

The dominant topics in Sweden for 2022 has been the war in Ukraine, with the associated discussion of the Swedish ascension to NATO, and the inflationary pressure put on households. The year was also characterised by an election and a new government, where the election cycle itself was also dominated by the inflation.

Inflation has been the main issue in the working life of Sweden. Even though relatively few households are reliant on natural gas and Sweden has a well-functioning production of electricity, the prices of electricity and household goods have increased dramatically. By August 2022, the inflation had nullified 7 years of real wage increases and has only increased since. The increases that caused the most discussion were the price hikes of electricity, petrol, and diesel, followed by the general increases in the prices of consumer goods and food.

Many analysts are predicting that the economy is heading for a recession in 2023. The Swedish Riksbank has increased the interest rates in 2022 to 2.5%, which since 2015 has been at or below 0%, which has further reduced purchasing power of Swedish households. The National Institute of Economic Research, a government agency tasked with analysing economic trends, predicts a wave of unemployment. The housing market, which was very strong in 2022, has already seen a decrease in prices.

This is all important background for the coming collective bargaining rounds in 2023, where wage demands need to be balanced between having wages that manage to keep up with increased prices on necessities like rent or mortgages, the ability of businesses to stay afloat, and the potential upward pressure on inflation of consumer goods that wages might pose. The discussions on the collective bargaining rounds of 2023 started already in October 2022, with more attention paid to the demands of each side than usual.

Political context

The political context has been dominated by the election cycle of 2022. The government of the Social Democrats, supported by the Green Party, Centre Party and Left Party, lost re-election against the opposition coalition of the Moderate Party, Christian Democrats, Sweden Democrats, and the Liberal Party. The new coalition government includes the Moderate Party, Christian Democrats and Liberal Party, but with support from the Sweden Democrats, which took power on 18 October. Their government agreement was detailed in a plan called the *Tidö Agreement*, which details some proposed reforms, in healthcare, climate and energy policy, crime, migration, school and finally growth and household economy.

The political discussion was dominated by discussions on inflation and the War in Ukraine, as in many European countries. The inflation discussions have focused on the price of petrol, diesel and electricity, as Swedish households are in general less reliant on natural gas than other European member states.

The war in Ukraine reignited discussions on Swedish membership to NATO, which was quickly decided to pursue by the Social Democratic coalition, in cooperation with the right-wing opposition block. However, the issue of Turkey's acceptance of Sweden into NATO has continued to be a political issue for both the previous Social Democratic government and the current Right-wing coalition.

The government has been under pressure to deliver relief to households facing large energy bills and criticised for not delivering fast enough. The support will be paid out in February, where the election promises were that it would be in place by 1 November. Additionally, the election promises of delivering a reduction in petrol and diesel prices by several Swedish kronor was also not realised, which has led to a tough situation in terms of trust in the new government. However, the government has only been in place for a few months and may very well be able to recuperate some trust in 2023.

Actors, institutions, and processes

Social partners

Merge of teachers' unions

There was one notable change in trade unions during 2022, which is that the two teachers' unions merged into one new union, the Swedish Teachers' Union, organising about 320,000 teachers in total. Headmasters and teachers without teaching permits are not able to join this new trade union, as they could before, but instead will be organised by other trade unions. This new union will be under the central academic trade union, SACO.

Swedish Transport Workers set to negotiate by themselves in 2023

Although not unprecedented, in the coming negotiation rounds, the Swedish Transport Workers Union has chosen not to negotiate in line with the rest of the blue-collar central union collective, the LO-collective. This means that the transport union will not be able to rely on strikes in the event of stranded negotiations for their collective agreements, which covers the transport sectors and ports, for instance.

Social dialogue bodies or frameworks

There are no social dialogue bodies in Sweden.

Other working life related institutions

There have not been any changes to working life related institutions, although in the election campaign several parties raised the issue of there being too many state institutions, and that some should be dismantled. Among the mentioned ones there are two directly linked to working life (in **bold** below), but all of the others are included as some have a role linked to working life:

- **The Swedish Public Employment Authority**
- **The Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise**
- The Discrimination Ombudsman
- The Delegation Against Segregation
- The Swedish Gender Equality Agency
- The Swedish Media Council
- The Water and Maritime Agency

However, the prioritised issues have been joining NATO and combating inflation, and no proposals of dismantling any government agencies has been announced. (Dagens Nyheter 2022a).

Governmental responses to inflation

In the spring, the Social democratic government announced a package of adjustments in response to the increased prices of electricity and petrol, which were as follows:

- 1) Temporarily reduced taxes on diesel and petrol during 1 June and 31 October, with additional tax breaks for companies in forestry, agriculture and aquaculture.ⁱ
- 2) A SEK 1,000 pay out to car owners for petrol price compensation.ⁱⁱ
- 3) Increased “climate bonus”, which means an increased subsidy for buying electric cars of up to SEK 70,000.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 4) A compensation for energy price bills, between SEK 100 and SEK 1,000, depending on use.
- 5) A temporarily increased housing support benefit for families with children, of up to SEK 1,325 per month in support (Företagarna 2022).

Since these support mechanisms have mostly timed out, and the new right-wing coalition government has replaced the Social Democrats, there has been a lot of discussion and focus on the new inflation support mechanisms implemented by the new government. As inflation was an important issue during the election cycle, lots of attention has been dedicated to the new government and their ability to deliver on their promises put forth prior to the election. Two important promises in this regard were made

- 1) Electricity support. The new government has announced an electricity price support that will pay out in February of 2023. While initially planned to only cover the southern and middle parts of Sweden, it has since been extended to include the northern parts of Sweden as well. The support will be based on usage.
- 2) Petrol and diesel price support. The price of petrol was lowered by SEK 0.14 per litre and diesel by SEK 0.40 per litre on 1 January 2023. The reductions were an important promise of the right-wing coalition, most notably among the Sweden Democrats. However, this reduction was criticised because it did not meet the promised reductions of SEK 10 per litre for diesel, and SEK 6.5 per litre for petrol (Dagens Nyheter, 2022b).

However, the current government has only been in power since October, and there may be developments in terms of price reductions waiting in 2023.

An important note in the context of labour market developments, is the government has little to no role in the regular wage setting. This is, in principle, only done by the social partners. The government can therefore not respond to inflation in terms of wage demands.

ⁱ Eurofound (2022), [Lower tax on diesel for companies in forestry, agriculture and aquaculture](#), SE-2022-1/2375 (measures in Sweden) COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

ⁱⁱ Eurofound (2022), [Compensation for owners of private cars to mitigate hike in fuel prices](#), case SE-2022-32/2352 (measures in Sweden) COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eurofound (2022), [Improved rules for climate bonus for electric vehicles](#), case SE-2022-38/2884 (measures in Sweden) COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

Collective bargaining and inflation

How inflation features in wage negotiations

In 2023 most collective agreements are set to expire, meaning that the end of 2022 saw the beginning of negotiation rounds. A brief timeline for the public statements is as follows:

In October, the central blue-collar union, LO, announced their opening bid for the coming negotiations, as is customary in the Swedish collective bargaining rounds. Most years, the social partners try to negotiate on a three-year basis, but because the future is especially uncertain now, they settled on a bid of 4.4% increase over a one-year contract, but with a minimum increase of SEK 1,192. All of the member unions of LO, except one, decided to cooperate around this target. The one trade union which decided to stand outside of the coordinated target was the Swedish Union of Transport Workers (LO, 2022). The transport worker union has since announced their own offer of 5.5%, as well as a one-time lump sum payment of SEK 5,726 per worker. The lump sum is based on the prolongation of the previous negotiation rounds, due to COVID-19 (Transportarbetaren, 2023). The implication of not participating in a coordinated negotiation is that the other trade unions in the central LO union will not threaten strikes should the negotiations fail in the transport agreement negotiations.

The employers usually do not announce their targets publicly before negotiation. However, the Association of Swedish Engineering Industries (*Teknikföretagen*) stated that this year is different due to inflation. In December 2022 the employer organisation announced that they have a target of 2% increase, but with a lump sum of SEK 3,000. They also intend to negotiate a one-year contract. The employers have also pointed out that the minimum level of SEK 1,192 means that some companies, employing more low-wage workers, could see a yearly increase of up to 5.2% (Tidningen Näringslivet, 2022a).

Examples of recent responses

At the local level, trade unions are free to demand other levels than set in the LO-coordination. An example of this is the local mine workers in Kiruna and Malmberget, where the workers are demanding raises of 20%. The workers argue that the mines have not been affected by any recession, as demand and profits have increased over the last years, and have therefore reacted to the 4.4% target wage increase with disappointment. In other mines, there are similar demands: in Svappavaara the workers demand 10% raises, and in Boliden they will demand 15% raises (Dagens Nyheter, 2022c).

Developments in working time

Changes to legislation

Overall, the discussion on adjustments to the working time has been peripheral. Only one party suggests a general shortening of the working week, the Left Party. They put this proposal forward almost every year however, and it is not a seriously considered issue. Reporting in media about working time reduction is mainly about developments abroad.

Adjustment to lifetime work – increased pension age

On 1 January 2023, an increase to the pension age came into effect, raising the pension age from 65 to 66 years old, after a decision in 2022. Simultaneously, the earliest retirement age is increased from 62 years old to 63 years old. The decision is in line with a previously decided recommendation from a special Pension group, which agreed in 2017 to gradually raise the pension age. The pension age will be increased to 67 in 2026, after which there will be a new system that gradually updates the pension age in line with new prognoses on life expectancy. The expected pension age for a 30-year-old worker today is 69 years old (Riksdagen, 2022; Pensionsmyndigheten, 2023)

Bargaining outcomes

No changes to working time in collective bargaining in 2022.

Debates on duration and organisation

A general shorting of working time has not been an important debate in Sweden in 2022.

Labour market shortages and social partners

According to a report from the Swedish Public Employment Agency, there has been a historically high shortage of labour in 2022. Four out of ten employers in the private sector reported that they have had a difficult time employing the required people across the entire year. The primary demand for labour is for the high skilled workers in the IT-sectors.

The HORECA sector has been hit hard by the pandemic. Workers in hotels and restaurants became unemployed as the travel- and restaurant restrictions were put in place, and these workers found new careers or started studying, and have not returned to the HORECA sector. The retail sector saw similar developments, as more business was moved to e-commerce, a development that was already in process before the pandemic.

The construction and forestry sectors were particularly affected by the reduced labour migrations due to the restricted movement during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Since borders have opened back up, these sectors saw the most significant decreases in labour shortages, albeit with significant issues remaining. Employers in the construction sector reported labour shortages to a rate of 48% in 2021, which decreased to 40% in 2022.

The labour shortage issue has put an increased focus on training for the labour market, which the report from the Swedish Public Employment Agency states could help alleviate the pressure that employers are facing. A measure to increase such training was part of the agreement to change the Protection of Employment Law, LAS (see Other important policy developments – Employment contract and status for more info). As part of the so-called LAS agreement, workers now have additional possibilities in the middle of their careers to return to university or trade school to up- or reskill, while keeping 80% of their salary level, up to SEK 27,863 per month, before taxes (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2022).

The issue of the temporarily increased maximum amount of unemployment benefits was another debated topic in relation to the shortage of labour. The discussion was centred on whether the temporary increase to the unemployment benefit should become permanent or not. The peak-level white collar union TCO writes that if the unemployment benefit is lowered, it increases the risk that potential workers leave the workforce altogether, instead of remaining on temporary unemployment benefits (TCO, 2022).

The Confederation of Swedish Business (*Svenskt Näringsliv*), however, posits the opposite effect, that the unemployment benefits are too high and therefore discouraging potential workers from joining the workforce. They remark that there were two historically high numbers in 2022, a record high number of people on unemployment benefits, and a record high number of available jobs. According to them, the difference between unemployment benefits and the wages that can be offered in sectors that are experiencing severe shortages is too low to incentivise workers to apply to the jobs, even in the jobs with collectively agreed wages (*Svenskt Näringsliv*, 2022a).

The right-wing coalition decided as part of their government agreement, the so-called *Tidö agreement*, to make the temporary increase to the unemployment benefits a permanent increase.

Other important policy developments

Labour market shortages

The policy reactions to labour shortages were primarily dealt with in cooperation with the social partners and is mentioned above.

Employment status and contracts

An important law in the Swedish labour market has been revised, the Law of Employment Protection, (*Lagen om Anställningsskydd, LAS*), in effect since June 2022. Summarised, the new law makes the following adjustments to the Swedish labour market:

- Employers can make further exceptions from the colloquially known “first-in-first-out” principle when doing staff reductions. This means that each company can exempt up to three particularly important, yet recently hired, employees from getting laid off when making staff reductions.
- The terminology for what is accepted criteria for making workers redundant has changed, from “factual basis” to “factual reasons”. Despite sounding like a minor change, it changes how the labour court can use previously guiding sentences to determine whether a redundancy has legal basis or not. The precise effect of this change will be seen in the future, as the law has not been tested enough in court to determine how different the ruling may become. In addition, the damages for an illegal redundancy have been increased.
- Changes to the criteria for part-time and temporary work contracts. The time until an employment contract is converted to permanent contract is changed: when a worker has worked in total 12 months over a 5-year period, the worker must be offered a permanent position. Previously, it was 24 months.
- More difficult to reduce working hours in a contract. This practice, called *planing* in Swedish, will be subject to an order of priority, where the most recently hired will have their working hours reduced first.
- Temporary agency workers who are stationed at the same employer for at least 24 out of 36 months must now be offered a position at the employer (Almega 2022; Arbetet 2022).

Self-employed

There have not been any significant updates to the policies concerning self-employed people in 2022. However, the government agency responsible for examining possible policy changes, Statens Offentliga Utredningar (SOU), proposed some changes to clarify the responsibility of the employer for the working environment in the case of hiring platform labour. The proposed change to the Work Environment Law is that a company that makes use of labour from a *physical person* without neither staffing nor hiring them, is the company with the main responsibility over the work environment. This change does not apply to private persons hiring another physical person to perform some labour, but only to companies. The point being that this change will make it so platform labour companies will become the main actor responsible for the work environment of their platform workers, regardless of if that physical person has registered themselves as a company or not. Importantly, this is only a proposal and not actual law yet (SOU, 2022).

Wage setting

Wage setting is largely unregulated by policy makers and is by nature flexible. The social partners can choose to negotiate a different length of collective agreement if the future seems unclear, but despite not being the standard length, such adjustments are not unusual. For example, the last time the main agreements were shorter was in 2016. There have not been any notable policy changes to wage setting, despite the fact the negotiation rounds of 2023 are looking tougher than usual.

Gender pay gap

According to a report from the government, released in 2022, the gender pay gap decreased from 29% to 23% between the years 2010 and 2020. The decrease in the gap can be explained primarily by the fact the labour market is less segregated by gender than it used to be, meaning men and women are to an increasing extent doing the same types of jobs. This means, that the wages in female dominated sectors may have remained at a lower level than the male dominated sectors, but that the sectors now have a greater gender diversity. Another part of the gender pay gap is further explained by an unequal use of the parental leave schemes, although, the difference between the use of these benefits is also decreasing. The government has proposed a number of measures to increase disposable income and have analysed the effects of these changes on the gender pay gap. The changes to the disposable income include:

- Making the temporary increase to the unemployment benefit a permanent level
- Extension of the temporary addition to the housing benefit for families with children
- Reduced taxes on labour income for older people
- Changes to the rules regarding the travel deduction

These changes are predicted to increase the disposable income gap between men and women, and not reduce it, primarily because of the changes to the unemployment benefit and the changes to travel deductions. The unemployment benefit may increase the gender pay gap, because men earn more money than women, and the unemployment benefit is, as a rule, based on 80% of the pre-unemployment salary up to a certain amount. They also tend to have jobs which include travel more, which leads to the travel deduction being used more by men than women. However, the changes to the housing benefit are predicted to be more used by women than by men, and the reduced taxes on labour is presumed to be equally valuable for both men and women. In absolute terms, men are presumed to gain more disposable income than women because of these changes.

Health and safety

In 2022 it was announced that a new project to combat working life criminality is starting in 2023. The project aims to more effectively work to eradicate human trafficking and work-related human exploitation. The policy is for governmental agencies to work in a cooperative manner to detect fraud, abuse, and crime affecting vulnerable people, thereby improving safety of workers in exposed situations. Two regional centres are already open, in Gothenburg and Umeå, and five more are planned to be opened in 2023. The joint effort includes the Swedish Work Environment Agency, the Police, The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, Public Prosecutors Office, Swedish Economic Crime Authority, The Swedish Gender Equality Agency, and The Tax Agency. The project is similar to how Norway works with work-related crime, where it has been effective (Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet, 2022).

Work–life balance

There have been discussions about work-life balance in 2022, but there have not been any significant policy developments.

Lifelong learning and skills development

In the agreement to change the Law of Employment Protection (LAS), the social partners decided on a system to better accommodate lifelong learning and skills development. The adjustment support (*omställningsstöd*), was launched on 1 October and is a grant for workers in the middle of their careers to allow them to study at university or trade school to acquire new skills with 80% of their previous salary, up to a maximum of SEK 21,300 in grant and with an optional SEK 12,500 in loans, per month. This maximum is reached by any worker earning about SEK 27,900 per month.

The interest for this support exceeded expectations. The Swedish Board of Student Finance (CSN) predicted 5,300 applications for the new support measure, but already by the end of October, 15,000 applications had been submitted (Svenskt Näringsliv, 2022b).

Political discussions about the support mechanisms are currently ongoing. The changes to LAS and the addition of the support mechanism for re-skilling is a policy decided by the social partners but turned into law without modification by the Social democratic government, which is a well-established practice in Swedish politics. However, the openness of the readjustment support has been criticised by some actors. In its formulation, the workers choosing to make use of the new support were able to study whichever courses or programs they pleased for up to 44 weeks, or longer with part-time studies. The current government has raised the issue of making the adjustment support more targeted towards re-skilling into occupations that are in low supply on the Swedish labour market but has yet to put forth any new proposals (Arbetsvärlden, 2022a),

The enthusiasm for the new support mechanism has caused some issues. The Swedish Board of Student Finance (CSN) employed 75 people to handle the expected inflow of applications of 5,300, but the unexpected pressure has led to many delays in handling. A trade union paper, Arbetsvärlden, reports that only seven people had been accepted by November, out of 20,632 applications by the end of November. Of these, 1,904 had gotten their applications denied, leaving many to still be handled. (Arbetsvärlden 2022b)

Working life of Ukrainian refugees

Employment and working conditions

The reporting on Ukrainian refugees and their working conditions has been primarily focused on the cases where the refugees have been exploited. This has been noted primarily in three sectors, the construction sector, the cleaning sector and in the agricultural sector. Some issues include lack of protective equipment, long working hours, and low wages. The issues of illegal migrant labour and poor conditions in the construction sector has gotten attention since before the war, but with the increased number of Ukrainian refugees, the situation has become worse. A story in the large daily newspaper Dagens Nyheter about a couple working in the agricultural sector in the south of Sweden received attention in October, a cucumber harvester had worked with cancerogenic chemicals without protection for up to 12-15 hours a day, and with wages much lower than the relevant collective agreement (Dagens Nyheter, 2022d, 2022e).

There are however also positive examples of the integration of Ukrainian refugees into the Swedish workforce in the tech-industry. A matching system was set up for Ukrainian ICT workers to be matched up with a Swedish tech company in March. According to the responsible company Ideon Science Park, about 70,000 programmers will be needed in Sweden by 2024. In April, there were about 142 interested companies, and 102 applicants who will be matched by an AI tool. The idea is that Ukrainians would be able to move back to Ukraine after the war had ended and keep their job in Sweden if they were be interested (Tidningen Näringslivet, 2022b; Ideon Science Park, 2022).

Additionally, the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (*Jämställdhetsmyndigheten*) published an update on the situation for Ukrainian women who are facing risks in Sweden. According to their report, they find a high risk that Ukrainian women might be forced into prostitution to support themselves, unless there is an active policy to help refugee women. The response has been to have information campaigns about Swedish laws at the larger ports of entry to Sweden, which, according to the report, has been helpful according to the Gender Equality Agency (*Jämställdhetsmyndigheten*, 2022).

Social partner initiatives to support Ukrainian refugees

The Swedish Confederation of Business (*Svenskt Näringsliv*), the peal-level blue collar union LO and the private sector white collar union Unionen reached an agreement on establishing jobs (*Etableringsjobb*). The measure is available for refugees who arrived in Sweden during the last three years and long-term unemployed people. The measure incentivises employing people from these categories by having the state pay a part of the total salary, thereby matching the lowest wage levels according to the collective agreement. The wage burden is split approximately evenly between state and employer. After the establishing phase of employment, the worker should in normal circumstances be offered a regular job, where the employer pays full wages. The agreement is in force starting 1 January 2023, but the government still needs to ratify the measure for it to officially start (Svenskt Näringsliv, 2022c).

Commentary and outlook

The main event of 2023 in terms of working life is expected to be the collective bargaining rounds, in which wage increases will be set for approximately 2 million workers across 450 collective agreements. The social partners in the industrial sectors aim to have a new collective agreement in place by April 2023, which according to tradition sets the target for the collective bargaining in the other sectors. The pressure of inflation might lead to more conflicts than usually experienced in the relatively calm Swedish labour market. Previous negotiation rounds took place in the beginning of the pandemic and agreements were formed without any industrial action taking place, which is historically unusual. In 2023, the inflation and recession make agreements potentially harder to reach. If the wage increases are too low, it risks individual trade unions breaking the peace and demanding higher wage increases in their sectors. Conversely, if the wage pressure is set too high, individual employer organisations may not concede, also leading to potential industrial action. This issue is already evident before the bargaining rounds have started. The blue-collar trade union collective, LO, aims for a 4.4% increase over one year for their workers, while their member, the Swedish Transport Workers Union, has announced that they will attempt to negotiate higher wage increases than that of the LO, meaning they will not be a part of the LO-coordination.

At the EU level, the Swedish trade unions and employer organisations are united in their opposition to the minimum wage directive. However, the Swedish government has announced that they will not follow Denmark in taking the issue to court. The Swedish government has carved out some exceptions to protect the current wage setting system, but some adjustments might be necessary to comply with the directive, such as ensuring adequate collection of data on collective agreements and wages, and measures to put in place in the event of falling collective bargaining coverage rates.

Furthermore, at the national level, the new government may propose some changes related to labour policy. In the government coalition agreement formed in 2022, the *Tidö agreement*, there are several proposed goals in the labour policy arena, some of which may be prioritised for 2023. There are many proposals to lower taxes and incentivise employer to hire additional staff, increase the value of work in contrast to living on social benefits, and lower administrative costs for companies. There is a much-debated section of the agreement that aims to heavily restrict the possibility of hiring labour migrants, both through a salary floor for migrant labour, and doing away with labour migrations in some occupations altogether. The agreement also proposes to increase the ability of workers to combine a high level of participation in the labour market with a healthy family life, which may mean proposals to further facilitate teleworking or flexible working times, however, the precise reforms are unspecified. What the focus of the new government in terms of labour market policy remains to be seen in 2023.

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The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a tripartite European Union Agency established in 1975. Its role is to provide knowledge in the area of social, employment and work-related policies according to Regulation (EU) 2019/127.