

# Docks and Defeat: The 1909 General Strike in Sweden and the Role of Port Labour

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Swedish trade unions' most devastating defeat was the general strike of 1909. In response to several lockouts, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) had launched a general strike in August that year, a decision taken without first consulting its affiliates or individual union members. Yet, according to Knut Bäckström, a central decision had never been so enthusiastically supported by the rank and file.<sup>1</sup> One obvious object of industrial action, both strikes and lockouts, is to damage the opponents' finances. The general strike struck a considerable blow against core industries such as iron, steel, timber, and pulp, threatening to close them more or less completely.<sup>2</sup> One might think, therefore, that the struck employers and their associations would have been eager to settle the conflict with the LO, even at the cost of an agreement mainly on the workers' terms. Instead, the general strike ended in a victory for the employers' association, the Swedish Employers' Confederation (SAF). The strike was just not powerful enough.

There are several reasons for the strike's ineffectiveness. This article's focus is the transportation system, an aspect of vital importance for the outcome of the strike, but one that was underestimated at the time by the LO and has continued to be by subsequent research. The railway workers did not take part in the strike for legal reasons – a well-known and often discussed weakness.<sup>3</sup> Even more crucial was the lack of labour resistance on the docks.

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1 K. Bäckström, *Arbetarrörelsen i Sverige. 2. Den politiska arbetarrörelsens sprängning och ett nytt revolutionärt arbetarpartis uppkomst* (Rabén and Sjögren, Stockholm: 1977), p. 104.

2 B. Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909: förhistoria och orsaker* (Göteborg, *Studia historica Gothoburgensia* 9: 1967), pp. 120–3.

3 W. H. Crook, *The General Strike: A Study of Labor's Tragic Weapon in Theory and Practice* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 1931), p. 131.

Although production was seriously affected in the export industries, their products were still handled in the ports.

This article raises three questions. First, how was export possible despite the dockworkers' strike? Second, why did the LO proclaim a general strike, but not pay more attention to resistance in the ports and harbours? And, third, how did developments in the ports and harbours fit into the overall strike strategy?

### Why ports matter

Some groups of workers possess the capacity to damage production, distribution, and profits not only of their own company, but of an entire industry or society at large.<sup>4</sup> This is a question of the strategic location of the workers, that is, when 'a localized work stoppage in a key node can cause disruptions on a much wider scale than the stoppage itself'.<sup>5</sup> Automotive workers have been a prime example of a group with a huge potential (and, from time to time, also a realized) ability to shut down production on a large scale through ripple effects.<sup>6</sup> Such workers possess a high degree of *positional power* or *disruptive potential* – defined as the output lost if a strike occurs.<sup>7</sup>

The concentration of a large volume of goods, much of it high value, in a limited space gives dockworkers a very high disruptive potential, a fact as true today as it was a hundred years ago.<sup>8</sup> In the Swedish context, this is most obvious. Sweden is geographically located in the Scandinavian Peninsula; the overwhelming bulk of foreign trade must go through the ports. At the time of the 1909 general strike, the dockers were among the most unionized

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4 For a discussion, see G. Arrighi, 'A Crisis of Hegemony', in S. Amin, G. Arrighi, A. Gunder Frank and I. M. Wallerstein, *Dynamics of Global Crisis* (Monthly Review Press, New York: 1982), p. 82; G. Arrighi and B. J. Silver, 'The United States and Western Europe in World-Historical Perspective', in C. Bergquist (ed.), *Labor in the Capitalist World-Economy* (Sage, Beverly Hills, CA: 1984); L. J. Griffin, 'Reviewers Comments', *American Sociological Review (ASR)* 49 (1984), pp. 425–6; L. Perrone, 'Positional Power, Strikes and Wages', *ASR* 49 (1984), pp. 413–21; B. J. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge University Press: 2003); E. O. Wright, 'Working-Class Power, Capitalist-Class Interests, and Class Compromise', *American Journal of Sociology (AJS)* 105:4 (2000), p. 962; *idem*, 'Postscript', *ASR* 49 (1984), pp. 421–5.

5 Silver, *Forces of Labor*, p. 13.

6 See e.g. Arrighi and Silver, 'The United States and Western Europe in World-Historical Perspective'; Silver, *Forces of Labor*, ch. 2.

7 Perrone, 'Positional Power, Strikes and Wages'.

8 That dockers possess strong positional power has been pointed out before: see E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: 1964), p. 204; Silver, *Forces of Labor*, p. 100; P. Turnbull and D. Sapsford, 'Why Did Devlin Fail? Casualism and Conflict on the Docks', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 29 (1991), pp. 237–57, at p. 238.

workers in Sweden. In other words, one of the prerequisites for making use of a disruptive potential – organizational capacity – was at hand.<sup>9</sup>

Yet there was a risk that the dockers, in Sweden and elsewhere, might be substituted by other workers. Two factors are relevant: first, the less skill required for a job, the easier it is to replace workers; and, second, the greater the substitutability, the lower the bargaining power of the workers. No consensus exists on how to define dockwork in terms of skill, but there is no doubt that dockers were more easily substitutable than most industrial workers.<sup>10</sup> There are two views regarding of the role of positional power: a factor in determining workers' relative wages,<sup>11</sup> and a factor explaining shifts in the long-term balance between labour and capital, and the spatial location of industries and social conflict.<sup>12</sup> This article's focus is the short-term influence of workers' positional power in a nationwide struggle with employers. Workers with high positional power, at least potentially, are key actors in overt, general social conflicts between labour and capital. This also addresses the question of the distinctions between disputes of interest and disputes of right, which was important in the Swedish general strike. Strikes and lockouts are usually conflicts of interest, that is, both parties are free to call industrial action to bring pressure to bear. Conflict over interpretation of a collective agreement is to be resolved by arbitration or adjudication. Although the vast majority of workers did not even have the right to vote in general elections in 1909, trade unions had the right to conclude collective agreements – agreements that were not yet officially declared legally binding *de jure*, but were, since 1907, most likely *de facto*.<sup>13</sup> The LO sought to compel the government to intervene legally to stop the conflict.<sup>14</sup>

### What is a 'general strike'?

Given its extraordinarily wide scope, the main issue confronting the 1909 Swedish general strike was to co-ordinate the action. This is a problem

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9 For a theoretical discussion on disruptive potential and unionization, see Wright, 'Post-script'.

10 J. Hamark, 'Strikingly Indifferent: The Myth of Militancy on the Docks prior to World War II', *Labor History* (forthcoming).

11 Perrone, 'Positional Power, Strikes and Wages'; M. Wallace, L. J. Griffin and B. A. Rubin, 'The Positional Power of American Labor, 1963–1977', *ASR* 54 (1989), pp. 197–214.

12 Arrighi, 'A Crisis of Hegemony'; Arrighi and Silver 'The United States and Western Europe in World-Historical Perspective'; Silver, *Forces of Labor*. But note that Arrighi and Silver denote the phenomenon *workplace bargaining power* rather than positional power.

13 H. Göransson, *Kollektivavtalet som fredspliktsinstrument: De grundläggande förbuden mot stridsåtgärder i historisk och internationell belysning* (Juristförlaget, Stockholm: 1988), chapter 5.3.

14 Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909*.

intrinsic to any general strike. The very notion of a ‘general’ strike dates back to the Chartists in 1839, who advocated it as a means to win universal suffrage.<sup>15</sup> One of the first to analyse the nature of general strikes was W. H. Crook, writing in 1931, almost exactly a century after the Chartists coined the term. For Crook, ‘The term *general* strike’ refers to ‘the strike of a majority of the workers in the more important industries of any one locality or region’. This definition has the advantage of not being overly narrow so as to include only strikes with a majority of workers in all industries in a region or a nation, but not so broad as to include a strike in any one trade throughout any large region.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Crook distinguished between three kinds of general strike. First, the *political* general strike, which sought political concessions from the government – for example, universal suffrage, as in the Swedish general strike of 1902. Second, the *economic* general strike, pressing for universal improvement in reimbursement for workers, exemplified by the 1909 Swedish general strike, ‘the most complete, non-revolutionary, general strike, for distinctly economic purposes, in the history of the labor movement up to the outbreak of the Great War of 1914’.<sup>17</sup> Third, Crook highlighted the *revolutionary* general strike as a category of its own, aimed at the overthrow of the government or the industrial system. It could have a revolutionary purpose from the very start, but it could also develop one as the conflict proceeded. Revolutionary general strikes, Crook claimed, are most likely to be found in countries where the working class has not been long or intensively organized, or where the labour movement is largely syndicalist or anarchist in viewpoint, as in Russia in 1905, Spain, or Italy.<sup>18</sup>

The use of the general strike had been discussed within the international labour movement since the First International (International Working Men’s Association, 1864–76). The person most associated with this debate is Rosa Luxemburg. Drawing on the experiences of the revolutionary upsurge in Russia in 1905 and early 1906, she argued that a mass strike cannot be made or decided from above. Nor can it be created by propaganda. Her view was instead that: (1) when a strike-wave (usually a wage-struggle) is met by state repression, it leads to a politicization of the strike; (2) this in turn leads to a greater class polarization and increased class solidarity; (3) at this stage, strike demands usually escalate and the role of the social-democratic party increases, since the strikers are more receptive to revolutionary propaganda.<sup>19</sup>

15 P. Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Ideas in Action* (Haymarket Books, Chicago, IL: 2010 [1939]), p. 127.

16 Crook, *The General Strike*, p. vii.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. vii–viii.

19 R. Luxemburg, ‘Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften’ [1906], in *idem*, *Gesammelte Werke Band IV: Gewerkschaftskampf und Massenstreik* (Vereinigung Internationaler Verlagsanstalten, Berlin: 1928); the text is also available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31614/31614-h/31614-h.htm>. Luxemburg’s argument is discussed in J. Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics* (Verso: 1988), pp. 36–8.

It is obvious that Luxemburg would not have shared Crook's division of general strikes into three distinct types. Nor did she accept the 'naïve' view she claimed she found among what she called the *Revolutionsromantikern* ('revolutionary romantics'). For them, the general strike was a universal method for the overthrow of capitalist society. The numerical strength of the working class would guarantee victory. For the *Revolutionsromantikern*, the general strike was, in the words of Luxemburg, '*ein bloßes technisches Kampfmittel*', that is, a mere technical weapon that could be employed when appropriate.<sup>20</sup> The *Revolutionsromantikern*, she stated, were first and foremost followers of the late Mikhail Bakunin and the anarchist stream, but their 'naïve ideas' could also be found among many social-democratic leaders. At the German Social Democratic Party's convention in Jena in September 1905, a resolution declared that the mass strike was a most powerful means for the working class, and political general strikes should therefore be employed in order to defend the right for men to vote in the parliamentary elections and to expand other working-class rights. During the convention, Luxemburg objected that the destiny of a general strike did not depend on what the party executives decided in their 'silent chambers'. Nor could a general strike be successful if it was always subordinated to parliamentarianism and was thus an appendage to the parliamentary struggle, as the 'practical politicians' took for granted that it should be.<sup>21</sup> Luxemburg was already stressing the latter in 1902, in a comment on the Belgian general strike that year: 'A general strike forged in advance within the fetters of legality is like a war demonstration with cannons whose charge has been dumped into a river within the very sight of the enemy.'<sup>22</sup>

### Prior to the strike

The 1909 conflict was the second Swedish general strike. In May 1902 there had been a general strike for universal suffrage proclaimed by two political parties – the Social Democrats supported by the Liberals – and not by the trade unions, although they were affiliated to the Social Democratic Party at the time. The strike was only two days long (it was never planned to last longer), and was considered successful. The principle of universal suffrage

20 Luxemburg, 'Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften', pp. 413–15.

21 R. Luxemburg, 'Reden auf dem Mannheimer Parteitag der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (September 1906)', in *idem, Gesammelte Werke Band II 1905 bis Juni 1911* (Dietz, Berlin: 1972), pp. 16–17, also available at <http://www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/luxemburg/1906/09/mannheim1906.html#top>; Luxemburg, 'Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften', pp. 417–18.

22 R. Luxemburg, 'Das belgische Experiment', in *idem, Gesammelte Werke Band IV*, p. 341. The English translation is by J. Hoornweg in Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 129.

now became generally accepted,<sup>23</sup> although it would still take almost two decades before it materialized in practice, and the suffrage movement had to fight several backlashes.<sup>24</sup> The greatest achievement was probably that the working class stood united for the first time and presented itself as a political force to be reckoned with; through its strength and mass support, it made a great impact on the Conservative government.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, an immediate reaction from the bigger Swedish companies and capital-owners was the founding of both the SAF and the Engineering Employers' Association (VF).<sup>26</sup>

Encouraged by the support for the 1902 strike, there was a wide discussion in the labour movement about using the general strike again, perhaps for more far-reaching purposes. In those discussions, transport workers were seen as a key group.<sup>27</sup> Charles Lindley, chairman of the Transport Workers' Union, wrote in his political memoirs that:

at that time there was an almost unlimited faith in the general strike as the decisive means to get universal suffrage, and in this battle transport workers were seen as the 'storm-troops'. There were even prominent persons within the Social Democratic Party who thought that it would be enough to take out the transport workers alone in a national strike, to solve the issue of the right to vote.<sup>28</sup>

Even though Lindley does not refer specifically to dockworkers, we can assume that they were the key group: at the time, dockers constituted the majority of the organized transport workers. Employers were also aware of the importance of the ports. In 1911, after the general strike, the SAF summarized its experience from the preceding years, stating that the economic losses from work stoppages in the ports were 'enormous', and that society

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23 F. Ström, 'Episoder ur arbetarnas frihetskamp', in *idem* (ed.), *Arbetets söner: Text och bilder ur den svenska arbetarrörelsens saga. Del II Samlingens tid* (3rd rev. edn; Steinsviks bokförlag, Stockholm: 1959), p. 227.

24 L. Berggren and M. Greiff, *En svensk historia från vikingatid till nutid* (Studentlitteratur, Lund: 2000), pp. 240–4.

25 K. Bäckström, *Arbetarrörelsen i Sverige. 1. Den svenska arbetarrörelsens uppkomst och förening med socialismen* (Rabén and Sjögren, Stockholm: 1977), p. 265; W. Milne-Bailey, 'A Nation on Strike: The Causes, Progress and Results of the British National Strike of 1926', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations (HSIR)* 29–30 (2010), p. 158; K. Kristensson, H. Nyström and Ö. Nyström, *Från mörkret stiga vi mot ljuset. Arbetarrörelsens historia i Sverige* (Proletärkultur, Göteborg: 1985), pp. 101–2. But see also Crook, *The General Strike*, pp. 106–7, for a less enthusiastic view.

26 Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909*, pp. 2–3.

27 B. Schiller, 'Storstrejken effektivitet', *Historisk Tidskrift* 84 (1964), pp. 185–92.

28 C. Lindley, *Svenska transportarbetareförbundet: historik. D. 1, 1897–1922* (Sv. Transportarbetareförbundet, Stockholm: 1977), p. 62.

must try 'by all possible means ... to keep business in the ports going'.<sup>29</sup>

In the so-called December Compromise of 1906, the LO recognized employers' exclusive right to hire and fire, and to manage and distribute work, or, in the capitalist jargon, the 'freedom of work', while the SAF formally recognized workers' right to join unions and for unions to negotiate wages and working conditions on behalf of their members. Although affiliated to the LO, Transport refused the December Compromise. In the ports, overcrowded by people looking for a few hours of work, it was always possible for employers to set aside union members, not by firing them but, more subtly, by not hiring them. Transport thus could not accept the 'freedom of work'.<sup>30</sup>

For two decades, dockers had challenged employers' prerogatives. Transport's influence over daily work arrangements in the ports was unique in the Swedish labour market.<sup>31</sup> This strength was an important part of what made dockers the vanguard. In 1907, the SAF and the Swedish Shipowners' Association joined forces to assert managerial control: the 'freedom of work' should from now on rule the ports too. Overt conflict broke out in the spring of 1907 and gradually spread; in the summer of 1908, almost all major Swedish ports were involved. The conflicts encompassed strikes, blockades, massive use of strikebreakers – more than 1,000 of whom were Englishmen, in addition to some 2,000 Swedes – and armed government troops.<sup>32</sup> Then, 'the battle of the ports' ended abruptly, in a crushing defeat for the dockers.<sup>33</sup> In 1900, union preference had existed in a majority of ports,<sup>34</sup> but by 1913, the situation was completely reversed: union precedence survived in one port only and the vast majority of the ports had collective agreements in line with the December Compromise.<sup>35</sup> Taking into account developments in the ports

29 C. Hallendorff, *Svenska arbetsgivarföreningen 1902–1927* (P. A. Norstedt and Söner, Stockholm: 1927), p. 188.

30 Lindley, *Svenska transportarbetareförbundet*, p. 173.

31 *Arbetsstatistik A:5, Kollektivavtal angående arbets- och löneförhållanden i Sverige. Del I. Redogörelse för kollektivavtalens utbredning och hufvudsakliga innehåll* (Kungliga Kommerskollegii avdelning för arbetsstatistik, Stockholm: 1910), pp. 374–81; G. Hagberg, *Norrlands stufvareförbund 1906–1931. Minnesskrift* (A.-B. Hasse W. Tullbergs boktryckeri, Stockholm: 1931), pp. 30–1; Hallendorff, *Svenska arbetsgivarföreningen*, pp. 188–9.

32 *Arbetsstatistik E:2. Arbetsinställelser i Sverige under år 1908* (Kungliga Kommerskollegii avdelning för arbetsmarknadsstatistik, Stockholm: 1909), p. 118; Y. Tidman, *Spräng Amalthea! Arbete, facklig kamp och strejkbryteri i nordvästeuropeiska hamnar 1870–1914* (Lund University Press, Malmö: 1998), pp. 219–20.

33 There are several reasons for the dockers' defeat: a limited strike fund, a downturn in the business cycle at the end of the conflict and, probably most important, the combination of half-hearted support from the LO and well-organized employers' resistance.

34 I. Johansson, *Strejken som vapen: fackföreningar och strejker i Norrköping 1870–1910* (Tiden, Stockholm: 1982), p. 195.

35 Statens Offentliga Utredningar, *Hamarbetaryrket i Sverige, socialstatistik* (Sveriges officiella statistik, Stockholm: 1916), pp. 63, 69.

during the years preceding 1909, there is little doubt that Transport and the dockworkers were weakened at the time of the general strike.

### The strike

Seeking to win national collective agreements on companies' terms, the SAF initiated several lockouts in July 1909. Out of 163,000 workers in SAF member-companies, 72,000 were locked out. In response, the LO called the general strike. At the time, the LO could count some 160,000 members, of whom 67,000 belonged to the two largest unions, both in manufacturing (*Grof- och fabriksarbetareförbundet* and *Järn- och metallarbetareförbundet*). The Transport Workers' Union organized a comparatively modest 9,000 members. In addition, there were blue-collar unions not affiliated to the LO, with an approximate membership of 50,000. The union density rate in the non-agriculture sector was just below one-third.<sup>36</sup> But the number of strikers was not limited by union membership: at the peak of the strike almost 300,000 workers had ceased work.<sup>37</sup> One reason why non-unionized workers followed the LO's call was that a majority of the locked-out workers did not belong to LO-affiliated unions. Paradoxically, the SAF's non-discriminating lockouts had 'aroused class solidarity and comradeship'.<sup>38</sup> 'Working days lost' in the entire conflict amounted to more than eleven million.<sup>39</sup> Measured as 'days lost' per capita, the 1968 general strike in France was larger, but the 1909 Swedish general strike and lockout remains one of the largest in European history.

In 1909, the LO hoped for a short but 'devastating' conflict or at least a conflict that would make a devastating impression on the government and force it to intervene to protect social order and public functions and, in doing so, enforce acceptable peace arrangements. The LO's hope proved futile. Beginning on 4 August 1909, the general strike lasted a full month until 4 September. With no victory in sight, the LO retreated. Even though minor strike actions continued, the battle was lost. The workers who were allowed to return to their former jobs did so solely on the SAF's terms; for many, this included a ban on membership in any trade union affiliated to the LO.<sup>40</sup> Yet

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36 G. Huss, *Redogörelse för lockouterna och storstrejken 1909, I* (K. kommerskollegii afdelning för arbetsstatistik, Stockholm: 1910), pp. 9–10, 16, 69, and Appendix III.

37 As a reference point, manufacturing, building and construction, and transport and communication employed slightly more than 500,000 workers.

38 Huss, *Redogörelse för lockouterna och storstrejken 1909, I*, p. 70.

39 G. Huss, *Redogörelse för lockouterna och storstrejken 1909, III* (K. kommerskollegii afdelning för arbetsstatistik, Stockholm: 1912), p. 116.

40 L. Olsson, "'Det är ingen skam att vara socialist': Arbetarrörelsen före det politiska makttillträdet", in L. Olsson and L. Ekdahl, *Klass i rörelse: Arbetarrörelsen i svensk samhälls- omvandling* (Arbetarrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek 101–102, Stockholm: 2002), p. 41.



it is often forgotten that the SAF did not achieve another of its goals, namely to negotiate a so-called general agreement with the weakened LO. Taking inspiration from the Danish general agreement – the *Septemberforliget* of 1899 – the SAF sought to conclude a general agreement embracing the entire labour market and thus force all LO-affiliates to accept ‘freedom of work’. Although the 1906 December Compromise had been a move in that direction, after the general strike the SAF still had to negotiate the terms with each union separately. This it managed fairly successfully.<sup>41</sup> When the strike started, Swedish trade unions had more than 210,000 members, some 160,000 of them in LO-affiliated unions. At the end of the year, membership was less than 150,000, of whom 108,000 were LO-members. The decline continued for two more years and reached its deepest trough at the turn of 1912, when only 114,000 people were organized in trade unions, 80,000 of them in LO-affiliates.<sup>42</sup>

The victory for the employers in such an enormous conflict could not be easily explained by the LO leadership. That the Swedish economy was in a recession favoured the employers, but there are other reasons for the workers’ defeat. The LO’s strike funds were meagre, and its leaders declared that no support would be given to members during the conflict. Even though this decision was not completely followed in practice, many workers with families suffered great hardship during the strike. The pressure occasionally led workers to commit ‘the greatest sin of all’, namely strikebreaking. The LO made a non-controversial choice to exclude healthcare personnel from the dispute, but its decision not to include electricity, water, street-sweeping, and even animal care, was met by a storm of protests from its affiliated trade unions and workers all over the country.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, when the typographers – who were not affiliated to the LO – joined the strike on 9 August, ambivalent liberals turned against the workers. As the liberals saw it, the strike now had become an attack on freedom of speech and they joined the right-wing chorus of condemnation. According to the leader of the Social Democratic Party, Hjalmar Branting, the typographers’ participation not only brought an end to attempts at positive mediation, but also led to hostile attacks in the right-wing and liberal sections of the press, which were not really affected by the strike, while the labour papers were silenced.<sup>44</sup>

Railway workers did not participate in the strike for legal reasons. Their trade union was not affiliated to the LO, but their potential participation was

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41 J. O. Berg, *På spaning efter en svensk modell: Idéer och vägval i arbetsgivarpolitiken 1897–1909* (Berg bild, rum and färg förlag, Enebyberg: 2011), pp. 393–6.

42 S. Sjöberg, ‘Fackföreningsrörelsen reser sig åter’, in Ström, *Arbetets söner*, p. 65.

43 Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909*, pp. 252–4.

44 H. Branting, ‘Storstrejken: Senare skedet’, *Tiden* 1:9 (1909), p. 5.

still subject to endless controversy. Most railway workers were government servants; their wages and pensions depended upon length of service. The government lost no time in announcing that any worker who joined the strike would forfeit his pension, and if he was re-employed afterwards then this would be at the bottom of the wage scale. Of the 24,000 organized railroad workers, only some 4,000 out of 20,000 voted in favour of the strike. This decision facilitated the supply of transport, which favoured the SAF.<sup>45</sup> But on the positive side for striking workers, the railwaymen contributed to the strike fund,<sup>46</sup> while the normal functioning of the railroads and the postal service further enabled the LO to keep in touch with its many local centres. Thus Crook is inaccurate when he argues that ‘When the railroadmen decided not to join the strike it became evident that the labor forces could no longer expect a victory.’<sup>47</sup> Another argument for staying out of the conflict was highlighted by Winberg, the secretary of the Railwaymen’s Union, on 5 August 1909. In case of a lockout, Winberg stated, a strike by the railroad workers would be insufficient, as the traffic was so limited anyway. That is, if the strike managed to shut down factories, ore fields, and so on, there would be no goods to transport. A strike among the railwaymen would further endanger relations with the government and, therefore, the main LO strategy. The government would likely interfere as an opponent of the LO, not as a mediator in the conflict, Winberg argued. This view was supported by both the strike leadership and Branting;<sup>48</sup> it would soon be apparent that this was a miscalculation.

The SAF had repeatedly challenged the LO with massive lockouts in the preceding years, and the LO had not been able to make a powerful response. LO leaders were afraid that the SAF would continue its lockout strategy if it were not met with strong resistance. In the LO’s strike proclamation, ‘the lockout frenzy’ and the ‘ruthless and aggressive’ tactics of the SAF were emphasized as the main reasons for the strike.<sup>49</sup> By extending the stoppage of work from the realms of the SAF to the entire labour market,<sup>50</sup> the LO aimed for a short, but extremely powerful, action that would not drain its meagre strike fund. Moreover, there was massive grass-roots pressure from

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45 Crook, *The General Strike*, p. 131.

46 L. Ljungmark, ‘Järnvägsmännen och storstrejken’, *Historisk Tidskrift* 88 (1968), pp. 467–70; Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909*, pp. 254–5.

47 Crook, *The General Strike*, pp. 131, 135.

48 Ljungmark, ‘Järnvägsmännen och storstrejken’, pp. 467–8.

49 G. Huss, *Redogörelse för lockouterna och storstrejken 1909, II* (K. kommerskollegii afdelning för arbetsstatistik, Stockholm: 1910), pp. 92–5; Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909*, pp. 226–35.

50 At the time, some highly important employers’ associations (most notably the engineering industry) had not yet affiliated to the SAF.

workers all over the country on the LO to proclaim a strike.<sup>51</sup> But, apart from the perceived necessity to counter-attack against the SAF, the LO did not formulate any offensive, pragmatic, positive demands. In the words of Bernt Schiller:

From the beginning, the General Strike was not planned to be a prolonged starvation war but a *blitzkrieg*. The sudden shock that hit society would force it to intervene and enforce an acceptable peace arrangement for the workers. Society as such would not be threatened, since the strike should be non-revolutionary in character.<sup>52</sup>

With government intervention the ultimate objective of the strike, it is easier to understand the reluctance of the LO to extend the conflict to the supply of electricity, water, and other essential services. As the LO leaders saw it, the liberals were needed as a mediating partner between the right-wing government and the labour movement's political branch, the Social Democratic Party. Thus the liberals should not to be scared away. For Schiller:

In its form, the General Strike became a compromise. The exceptions were simultaneously too few and too many: too few to prevent scaring off liberal opinion, or in rage join the right and the employers – foremost due to the typographers' strike, but also because of other breaches of contracts, real or imagined. At the same time, there was one exception too many: the railwaymen. During an economic crisis with huge piled-up stocks of finished goods waiting for transport, this had a profound impact.<sup>53</sup>

Schiller's last remark applies equally to the docks.

### **Some important statistics**

The general strike's disruptive power is revealed in an analysis of three core export industries – iron and steel, timber, and pulp. There are no monthly statistics of industrial production for the period of the strike. According to Schiller, the men still working during the strike (between one-fifth and one-quarter of the regular workforce in these three industries) were too few to maintain production, which was thus shut down almost completely. Schiller draws on the so-called Huss inquiry when claiming that production was stopped in August.<sup>54</sup> Yet it is difficult to find any direct support for this claim

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51 Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909*, pp. 226–35.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 260.

54 Schiller, 'Storstrejken effektivitet', *Hist. Tid.*, p. 186.

in Huss's text. And, as Schiller notes, the strike figures are not disaggregated, which means there could have been companies affiliated to the SAF where far more than 20–25% of employees at work during the strike. On the other hand, several contemporary comments support Schiller's view, though they lack any statistical references.<sup>55</sup> To conclude, Schiller's assessment may or may not be correct, but even if it is accepted that production was seriously hampered, there is a twist: export from these same industries did not collapse.<sup>56</sup> For example, as shown in Table 1, the export of pulp in August 1909 was just under one-half of the previous month's figure.

Table 1. *Exports in selected industries*

Exports* in August 1909 as a percentage of export in	Iron and steel	Timber	Pulp
August 1907, 1908, 1910**	46.5%	56.1%	54.2%
July 1909	44.2%	56.2%	47.4%

*Note:* \* Measured in physical volumes, not in prices; \*\* the arithmetic mean value for August 1907 (economic boom), August 1908 (economic depression), and August 1910 (economic recovery).

*Source:* Schiller, 'Storstrejken effektivitet', *Hist. Tid.*, pp. 187–8.

Generally, the goods exported in August 1909 were approximately 50% of the figure for July and of the mean value for August in 1907, 1908 and 1910. There was variation between ports (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Exports\* in August 1909 as a percentage of the July 1909 figure: Iron and steel, timber, and pulp in the most important ports*

	Iron and steel	Timber	Pulp
Gothenburg	46.9%	35.2%	48.6%
Stockholm	53.7%	n/a	n/a
Gävle	18.8%	15.0%	51.5%
Sundsvall	n/a	26.0%	67.2%
Härnösand	n/a	64.6%	26.3%
Örnsköldsvik	n/a	83.0%	81.9%
Umeå	n/a	84.3%	55.5%
Total	44.2%	56.2%	47.4%

*Note:* \* Measured in physical volumes, not in prices.

*Source:* Schiller, 'Storstrejken effektivitet', *Hist. Tid.*, pp. 190–1.

<sup>55</sup> cf. R. Breitscheid, 'Generalstrejken i Sverige', *Tiden* 1:9 (1909), p. 186.

<sup>56</sup> Schiller, 'Storstrejken effektivitet', *Hist. Tid.*, p. 186.

The strike occurred in the middle of a recession and large stocks had been accumulated: stocks that the struck companies could now sell. In addition, earlier research has hinted that there must have been numerous strike-breakers in the ports, and that the dockers and their union were demoralized when the LO proclaimed the strike, due to heavy losses in the long and violent nationwide conflict in the ports during the preceding years.<sup>57</sup>

### The general strike in the ports

A detailed official inquiry into the general strike, written only a year after the conflict, gives a detailed and disaggregated analysis of worker participation. The inquiry draws on a sample that includes forty-one ports, covering some 5,000 dockers, corresponding to roughly half the industry's workforce.

Table 3. *Percentage working during the strike*

	4 Aug.	11 Aug.	16 Aug.	23 Aug.	30 Aug.	4 Sep.	6 Sep.
Dockers	6.7%	8.1%	9.2%	14.3%	17.0%	25.3%	35.3%
All workers	19.9%	13.3%	15.2%	20.8%	25.0%	30.1%	47.6%

*Source:* G. Huss, *Redogörelse för lockouterna och storstrejken i Sverige år 1909. III* (K. kommerskollegii afdelning för arbetsstatistik, Stockholm: 1912), pp. 174–5.

Some interesting observations can be made. First and foremost, the dockers' participation rate was higher than that of workers in general. This suggests that the willingness to strike among the dockers was on a par with the working class as a whole. Strike participation was strongest at the beginning of the conflict. Most importantly, an average of about 10% of the dockers worked in August, but they handled a volume around 50% of a typical month. This is obviously a paradox. From the figures presented by the inquiry, it is not possible to distinguish between workers who continued to work and those who took new jobs during the conflict; that is, strikebreakers from inside and outside are lumped together. Considering strikebreakers from the

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 190–1; S. E. Olsson, 'Hamnarbetarna och Transportarbetareförbundet 1897–1972', *Arkiv för studier i arbetarrörelsens historia* 7–8 (1975), p. 21. Olsson argues that the battle in the ports was a conscious strategy on behalf of the employers to crush one of their most dangerous opponents – the dockers' union – before a full-scale labour market conflict broke out. As intriguing as this may be, we have not seen any evidence supporting this view.

outside, the paradox is even more significant since these workers mostly performed worse than the ordinary workforce.<sup>58</sup>

How to solve this puzzle? Could it be that dockers continued to work in the most important ports to a greater extent? To answer this question requires scrutiny of the primary sources used by the official investigation. The strike was fully supported in Stockholm and Gävle from its beginning on 4 August until 6 September, when most dockworkers returned. This is counterintuitive, especially in the case of Stockholm, as its iron and steel exports were well over 50% of July's. Records from Sundsvall and Örnsköldsvik also indicate almost total support for the strike.

Regrettably, the primary sources from Sweden's most important port, then and now, Gothenburg, have been lost,<sup>59</sup> and it is necessary to rely upon minutes of union and employer meetings. According to the report of a union meeting the day after the strike started, 1,280 dockers had already joined on 4 August. The strike was 'to all intents and purposes effective ... only stevedores and foremen among a few workers continued work'.<sup>60</sup> On the third day, one local strike leader reported that only fourteen strikebreakers had been engaged, ten of whom were friends of the recruiting agent specially employed for the task. On the seventh day, the employers did better: according to union sources, forty-four strikebreakers were recruited. After three weeks, despite vigorous efforts, the employers had still not obtained any significant numbers.<sup>61</sup> Workers' solidarity seems to have crumbled in late August, although the vast majority continued to strike.<sup>62</sup> In an interview with Schiller for a television programme in 1969, some SAF representatives recalled that professionals and salaried employees had taken part in dockwork. One interviewee, Gunnar Sundblad, at the time employed at the Vifstavarv shipyard in northern Sweden, described how he had been involved in loading his company's stocks of cellulose for export.<sup>63</sup> It is impossible to estimate the importance of such work.

To sum up: according to official statistics, some 10% of the dockers remained at work in August 1909. The primary sources suggest that the

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58 For a union assessment on strikebreakers, see H. Hjern, *Historik över Göteborgs hamnarbetarefackförening med sektioner 50-åriga tillvaro* (Göteborgs hamnarbetarefackförening, Göteborg: 1935), p. 151; for an employer assessment, see *Arbetsstatistik E:2*, p.121.

59 The same goes for the ports of Härnösand and Umeå.

60 Minutes, Svenska Transportarbetareförbundet Avdelning 2. Göteborgs Hamnarbetarefackförening. Protokoll 1909–1910, A I: 9. Lands- och regionarkivet, Göteborg.

61 The employers' summary gives another picture of the situation in the port of Gothenburg (see below).

62 Minutes, Svenska Transportarbetareförbundet Avdelning 2. Göteborgs Hamnarbetarefackförening. Protokoll 1909–1910, A I: 9. Region- och Stadsarkivet i Göteborg med Folkkrörelsernas arkiv.

63 *Storstrejken 1909*, TV programme produced by Bernt Schiller and Bengt Röhlander for SVT, Göteborg, 1969.

percentage working in the most important ports was even less, close to zero in several ports. Massive exports thus took place despite the dockers being on strike. Schiller concluded that while some 20% of industrial workers remained at work, production was almost completely shut down, because production processes were too complex to be maintained with so many absent.<sup>64</sup> The ports were different. Since work was still performed manually, ten dockers would do no more and no less than one-tenth of the work of 100. Primitive technology compared to industry also made it relatively easy to replace striking dockers from outside, though not as easy as has been suggested.<sup>65</sup>

### Did seamen make exports possible?

Thus far it has been assumed that the ports were more or less the last link in the export chain. But, obviously, this was the shipping sector. All enrolled Swedish seamen were bound by the Law of Sea; in practice, this meant a ban on strikes. This is reflected in the official inquiry into the general strike. On average, about 70% of seamen remained at work during August,<sup>66</sup> a figure much higher than those for dockers or workers in general. Other sources indicate that only 3,000 of a total of 20,000 seamen were on strike.<sup>67</sup>

Did sailors load and unload ships? In the era of sailing ships, the crew did all the loading and unloading, while the work on the waterfront was the responsibility of dockers. This arrangement served a purpose: cargo storage required certain skills, skills which the crew – who knew their ships – had, but the land-based labour did not. This division of labour functioned until steamships appeared, when the number of crew was severely reduced. Thereafter, shore-based dockers undertook loading and unloading.<sup>68</sup>

In the 1860s, ships' officers in northern Sweden operating on foreign ships started to subcontract loading and unloading. Language barriers made it reasonable to hand over the hiring of men, as well as the direct management

64 Schiller, 'Storstrejken effektivitet', p. 185.

65 I. Flink, *Strejkbryteriet och arbetets frihet: En studie av svensk arbetsmarknad fram till 1938* (Studia Historica Upsaliensia 99, Uppsala: 1978), pp. 113–14, shows that the common assumption that strikebreaking primarily targeted 'unqualified' work is not correct. Instead, at least in Sweden, strikebreakers were used to a greater extent in sectors (i) that were especially important for industry and society as a whole, and (ii) where conditions made it impossible for employers to prepare for a conflict by piling up stocks. Both these situations easily apply to dockwork.

66 Huss, *Redogörelse för lockouterna ochorstrejken i Sverige år 1909, III*, pp. 174–5.

67 Landsorganisationen. A II: 1. Protokoll-bok, Landsorganisationens representantskap 22 August 1909; *Sjöfolkets Tidning*, August 1909.

68 S. Erixon, *Stockholms hamnarbetare: före fackföreningens genombrott: en etnologisk studie* (2nd edn; Atlantis, Stockholm: 1988), p. 28.

of work, to a middleman, often with long experience of dockwork and with the confidence of the ship's officer.<sup>69</sup> In Gothenburg, stevedoring companies began to hire workers on a more regular basis in the 1870s;<sup>70</sup> in terms of tonnage, the steamship fleet was larger than the sailing ships' fleet by the end of the 1880s. Taking into account the greater capacity of steamships – and that steamships did not get stuck for weeks in ports due to bad weather – it is necessary to multiply steamships by a factor of three to obtain an estimate of goods transported, an operation which additionally underlines the shift from sail to steam, and wood to steel. At the time of the general strike, sailing ships constituted only a tiny fraction of the total Gothenburg fleet, measured by tonnage.<sup>71</sup> If measured in goods transported, then the importance of sailing ships in Gothenburg was almost negligible.

Working conditions for seamen in the early twentieth century were often poor and hazardous. This was especially so on Swedish ships; working hours were longer and monthly wages lower than in other countries. On average, a Swedish crewman earned less than 60% of his British counterpart's wage.<sup>72</sup> Few Swedish seamen were unionized. The union's magazine often discussed this issue, once under the heading: 'The Swedish seamen's laziness attracts attention abroad'. The leadership of the Seafarers' Union claimed that Swedish seamen, 'just like the capitalists', profited from other people's work: 'They do nothing to improve the conditions in their own country, but instead travel abroad to receive the benefits seamen in other countries have had the reason, the courage and the spirit of self-sacrifice to secure for themselves.'<sup>73</sup> Shortly before the general strike, the union's magazine dejectedly wrote: 'for more than ten years [we have] sacrificed time and resources on the apparently fruitless task of organizing Swedish seamen.'<sup>74</sup> When the strike broke out, Lindley, advised that

It is very difficult to give seamen definite directions for how to behave during this fight. The best way would obviously be for seamen, like other workers, to stop work on all ships, but on the other hand one must take into account the law of the sea and its draconian criminal provisions ... We must therefore leave it to the seamen themselves, each person in his workplace, to try to act in such a way that he supports the Swedish working class in the ongoing struggle as

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69 Hagberg, *Norrlands stufvareförbund 1906–1931*, p. 7.

70 A. Björklund, *Hammens arbetare: En etnologisk undersökning av stuveriarbetet i Göteborg* (Nordiska museets handlingar, 101, Stockholm: 1984), p. 15.

71 J. Kuuse and K. Olsson, *Sjöfartsförsäkring under 125 år* (Sveriges Ångfartygs Assurans Förening, Göteborg: 1997), pp. 63–5.

72 Y. Gyllin, *Förbund på sju hav: Händelser och gestalter i sjöfolkets historia* (Allhems förlag, Malmö: 1964), p. 92.

73 *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 96.



effectively as he can, and we are fully convinced that the seamen know to do their duty.<sup>75</sup>

This is non-guidance as guidance, and it is notable that Lindley leaves the decision to the individual seamen, not to local union branches. From a trade-union perspective, seamanship was indeed a dismal story; at the time, it was probably the least organized blue-collar male occupation. While this is not a proof that seamen did dockers' work during the strike, low union density and virtually non-existent union self-esteem (which apparently also included its chairman) are important prerequisites for employers looking for strikebreakers.

Critics of the 'law of the sea' never missed the opportunity to argue that the law had, in essence, been the same since King Carolus XI's days in the seventeenth century. Among other things, the law had a clause on mutiny: the seamen had to obey orders from their captain or would be convicted. Seamen were forced to do dockwork during a conflict in Norrköping in 1908.<sup>76</sup> This also happened during the general strike. The most publicized case was in Gävle: the crew aboard the steamer *Gertrud* refused to transport iron ore from the dock to the ship; they were arrested, convicted for 'disobedience', and fined.<sup>77</sup>

It is thus reasonable to believe that seamen acted as strikebreakers during the general strike, whether they liked it or not. Evidence for the widespread use of seamen as strikebreakers can be found in the 1909 annual report from the Swedish Shipowners' Association (SSA) in western Sweden, where shipping is claimed to have been 'satisfactorily maintained' during the strike.<sup>78</sup>

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75 *Sjöfolkets Tidning*, August 1909.

76 Norrköping was the epicentre of 'the battle of the ports' in 1907–08 referred to above.

77 Högsta Domstolens Koncepter 1913, mars–april. Riksarkivet, Marieberg, Stockholm. The initial verdict was in essence confirmed by the higher judicial body but, despite what Gyllin (*Förbund på sju hav*, pp. 98–9) writes, the case never went to the Supreme Court, as the convicted seamen did not appeal in time.

78 This assessment does not easily fit with the minutes from the local dockers' union referred to above. The different statements could partly be explained by the SSA report covering August and September since, even though the General Strike ended on 4 September, stoppages of work continued within the realms of the SAF. Since the union had problems holding the ranks together at the end of August and the problems worsened in September, it is obvious that, from the employers' perspective, an assessment of both months would be more positive than one dealing only with August. But still the differences are puzzling. It is also peculiar that there is no trace in the minutes of the dockers discussing strike-breaking seamen. According to the logbooks from the port of Gothenburg, traffic was indeed affected by the strike, but it would be wrong to call it a breakdown. Incoming ships in August 1909 made up 70% of the average value for arrivals in August in the two years before and the two years after the strike (Göteborgs hamnstyrelse. Hamnbevakningens dagböcker över ankommande fartyg. Region- och Stadsarkivet i Göteborg med Folkkrörelsernas arkiv. D1a: 10–14). Since we are primarily interested in exports, incoming ships is obviously not the most relevant measure, but we have not been successful in finding data on outgoing ships. The logbooks seem to confirm the SSA report.

In Gothenburg this was made possible by a land-based workforce of 400 men – ‘ordinary’ strikebreakers – together with, and this is crucial, the ships’ crews.<sup>79</sup> Newspapers also report seamen working at Gothenburg docks.<sup>80</sup> The strike reports from the local Seafarers’ Union’s meetings in Gothenburg are scanty. A few days after the conflict was ended, the minutes noted that ‘some’ seafarers had been ‘disloyal’ to the cause of the workers.<sup>81</sup>

Stockholm was apparently similar. According to the social-democratic daily newspaper *Socialdemokraten*, the local branch of the Seafarers’ Union expressed its ‘sympathy’ for the general strike and protested against ‘those of our comrades, who, unbound by the law of the sea, nevertheless have proven disloyal by taking the side of the employers’.<sup>82</sup> The conservative paper *Svenska Dagbladet* reported ‘agitators in the port trying to get seafarers not enrolled to join the strike’.<sup>83</sup> Some files in the SAF archive on the indemnification of its strike-bound affiliates reveal aspects of the truth behind these newspaper stories. Most notably, one of the largest stevedoring firms in Stockholm did not employ a single dockworker from its own staff in August. Nevertheless, 1,100 work days were carried out, two-thirds by ships’ officers and crew members, and one-third ‘mainly’ by German strikebreakers.<sup>84</sup> In Sweden’s largest southern city, Malmö, a stevedoring company reported to the Huss inquiry that it had to use ‘the ships’ own crews together with English workers’ in order to maintain operations.<sup>85</sup>

There were thus three distinct groups of workers who maintained the operation of the ports. First were those members of the docks’ ordinary labour force who had not joined the strike. A second group was made up of Swedish, German, and British strikebreakers, newly recruited and not necessarily experienced in dockwork. These two groups amounted to roughly 10% of the ordinary workforce. The size of the third group, the seafarers, is impossible to estimate, but they were no doubt important in maintaining the

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79 Swedish Shipowners’ Association in Western Sweden 1910 (Landsarkivet: Göteborg). The report further states that the Swedish shipping business suffered as a result of the strike, but that shipping in western Sweden did fairly well, ‘since new labour was obtained relatively quickly, and these workers together with the crews, served the ships well without too much delay’. As an explanation for the relative success of Gothenburg and the rest of the west coast, the report points out that a barrack for free labourers was ready even before the conflict started.

80 *Ny Tid* (social democratic), 4 September 1909; *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* (liberal) 4 September 1909.

81 Protokoll fört vid möte med Sv. Sjömans- och eldareförbundets Göteborgsavdelning, torsdagen 9 september 1909. Region- och Stadsarkivet i Göteborg med Folkkrörelsernas arkiv.

82 *Socialdemokraten*, 8 August 1909.

83 *Svenska Dagbladet*, 7 August 1909.

84 SAF archive, ‘Handlingar rörande storstrejken 1909’ (Svenskt Näringsliv, Centrum för Näringslivshistoria).

85 Kommerskollegium, Avdelningen för arbetsstatistik 1903–1912.

operation of the docks. One stevedoring company reported that business was maintained to a certain extent by foremen,<sup>86</sup> though it is not clear whether these foremen were included in 'workers at work' in the Huss inquiry. A few years after the strike, a public commission stated that the national average number of dockers per foreman were 28.4.<sup>87</sup> Assuming that this relation was valid during the strike, it means that *if* foremen are not included in the Huss figures, and *if* all of these foremen worked during the strike, then about 13% of the regular workforce (workers plus their foremen) were at work in August.

Another aspect to consider is the loading and transport of wood products from the factories to the ships. This work was not necessarily performed by dockworkers, but was probably partly carried out by the factory workers. This may not have been recorded as 'dockwork' in the Huss inquiry (see Table 3), therefore actual dockwork might have been more extensive than the figures indicate, since 'strikebreaking' factory workers loading ships may have been recorded as 'workers at work' in the sawmill industry. This question remains, because a report from a sawmill and its associated harbour found its way into dockwork statistics, despite the company most likely using its own workers to load ships.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, if the cargo was not shipped abroad directly, but was trans-shipped to Stockholm (the most realistic port), then 'real' dockworkers must have been involved; if so, the recording problem vanishes. Case studies of companies are required for further information. Although it is not possible to quantify the role of seafarers in strikebreaking, qualitative sources leave little doubt that they played an important part in maintaining exports.

### **The role of the LO**

There is yet another puzzle regarding the ports and the general strike. Why did the LO, then one of the strongest trade-union confederations in Europe, not do more to encourage resistance in the ports? The Swedish labour movement was fully aware of the strategic importance of the ports and transportation workers, but this was not evident in either contemporary or subsequent analyses of the general strike. A few writers involved in the labour movement have analysed the defeat. Ragnar Casparsson, the social-democratic author and politician, stressed the lack of financial resources as decisive and the fact that the railway workers did not strike, but he does not

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86 *Ibid.*

87 Socialstatistik 1916: 38. In Gothenburg port, there were only 14.1 dockers per foreman.

88 Kommerskollegium, Avdelningen för arbetsstatistik 1903–1912.

mention the ports.<sup>89</sup> Although he began his political and journalistic career in the anarcho-syndicalist movement, Casparsson had long since adapted to the reformist wing of the labour movement, and his views can be seen as representative of both the LO and the Social Democratic Party. The communist writer Knut Bäckström, a contemporary of Casparsson, did question the LO's leadership for not having a clear aim for the strike, but paid no more interest to the ports than the latter.<sup>90</sup> The ignorance displayed by these two contrasting writers illustrates the sparse attention the port question was given by the LO at the time of the strike. The minutes from the executive council and the LO's general council do not contain any discussions on port matters, nor do the minutes from Transport's central archive.<sup>91</sup>

It is further possible – though hard to prove empirically – that the growing antagonism between the LO and Transport after the December Compromise in 1906 might explain in part the lack of interest in the ports shown by the LO during the general strike. Transport refused to accept the December Compromise, and the organization continued to defy the employers, which led to the violent conflict in the ports. From the LO's viewpoint, Transport became a threat to stable industrial relations. It is apparent that in the summer of 1908, when the conflict in the ports had become truly nationwide, the LO leadership was most antagonistic towards Transport. In May 1908, the LO unenthusiastically decided to give financial support to the transport workers, but when the SAF declared in June that striking dockers were a threat to the shipping and industry of the entire country, and that it would answer any continued defiance with a general lockout affecting 220,000 workers, the LO changed its mind.<sup>92</sup> The labour movement's political leadership also increased the pressure: at an executive meeting within the Social Democratic Party, Branting, the chairman, declared that the transport workers had to accept a temporary change for the worse rather than throwing the entire working class into a conflict.<sup>93</sup> 'Unwilling to spend funds on a cause it had explicitly rejected [in the December Compromise], the LO joined forces with the government to pressurize Transport to submit to [the 'freedom of work']'.<sup>94</sup> Standing alone, Transport abandoned the struggle.

89 R. Casparsson, *LO under fem årtionden. Första delen. 1898–1923* (Tidens Förlag, Stockholm: 1951), pp. 298–307; R. Casparsson, *LO: bakgrund, utveckling, verksamhet* (Bokförlaget Prisma, Stockholm: 1966), pp. 125–8.

90 Bäckström, *Arbetarrörelsen i Sverige 2*, pp. 107–8 (1st edn published in 1958).

91 Landsorganisationen. A III. Protokollsbok för Landssekreterariatet 3 okt. 1908 – 18 aug. 1909; A II: 1. Protokoll-bok. Landsorganisationens Representantskap; Svenska transportarbetareförbundet, A: protokoll. (Arbetarrörelsens Arkiv och Bibliotek, ARAB),

92 Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909*, pp. 73–81.

93 *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 94.

94 P. A. Swenson, *Capitalists against Markets. The Making of Labor Markets and Welfare States in the United States and Sweden* (Oxford University Press: 2002), p. 82.

One parameter for assessing labour resistance in the early twentieth century is collective violence. This mode of resistance – which has largely been neglected in Swedish working-class history – was mostly small-scale in character, often expressed as harassment of strikebreakers.<sup>95</sup> The absence of ‘histories of violence’ in both primary and secondary sources on the general strike and the ports is remarkable. For example, the minutes of the dockers’ union in Gothenburg do not include any discussion of plans for a physical hindering of strikebreakers, let alone its implementation. This might be viewed as a sign of weakness on the dockers’ part. On the other hand, in its historical context, the absence of physical resistance is not surprising. The final act of ‘the battle of the ports’ was the explosion in the port of Malmö in July 1908. Provoked by the use of English strikebreakers, three young unemployed workers planted and detonated a bomb on the ship *Amalthea*, which housed the Englishmen. The explosion killed one strikebreaker and injured more than twenty others. The worker who had planted the bomb on the ship and one of the others were sentenced to death, while the third member of the plot received penal servitude for life. The two death sentences were carried out.<sup>96</sup> The verdicts probably had a deep impact on workers’ – especially dockers’ – willingness to use violence during the general strike. Furthermore, since 1893 it had been illegal to force someone to strike or to in any way prevent someone from working. This law was sharpened in 1899 with the notorious *Åkarpslagen*, which stated that it was a crime to even *try* to take such measures or enforce someone to do so.<sup>97</sup>

This returns the focus to the LO, and what could have been done to stop exports from the ports. Obviously this had to be hindering or stopping the strikebreakers, if necessary with physical means. With the moral and political support of the LO, dockers and other workers might have felt strong enough to stop the strikebreakers and thereby challenge the state apparatus. That no moral support was given by LO headquarters is logical, considering the overall strategy of the strike was to make the government intervene. To encourage the breaking of existing laws would have endangered this strategy and the position of the LO.

Further, it seems that the LO misjudged the situation in the transport sector. Its daily strike paper, *The Answer (Svaret)*,<sup>98</sup> argued that it was not a problem that railway workers and seamen not striking since there were few

95 S. Nyzell, ‘Striden ägde rum i Malmö’: *Möllevångskravallerna 1926. En studie av politiskt våld i mellankrigstidens Sverige* (Malmö högskola: 2009), p. 10.

96 Tidman, *Spräng Amalthea!*

97 Göransson, *Kollektivavtalet som fredspliktsinstrument*, p. 162. It was not until 1938 that the law was abolished, in conjunction with the historic settlement between the LO and the SAF in Saltsjöbaden.

98 As mentioned, a few days after the outburst, the typographers went on strike too. To spread information and propaganda to its members, the LO therefore produced its own paper.

goods to move.<sup>99</sup> As shown in tables 1 and 2 above, this was not the case. In retrospect, it is hard to understand the LO's judgement as anything but a result of ignorance. It is possible that it was propaganda: the leaders were keeping up appearances. Yet, if one assumes that the leadership did not think the general strike was a lost cause from the very beginning, then surely a more efficient stream of propaganda would have been to encourage transport workers to do their utmost to stop the shipments.

One possible, but controversial, explanation of the LO's passivity in the ports and the transport sector is that the leadership did not worry too much about winning the strike – an argument at the time stressed by the left-wing opposition with the Social Democratic Party, the so-called 'young socialists' (*ungsocialisterna*) and their leader, Hinke Bergegren.<sup>100</sup> This raises the question of what the parties meant by 'winning'. The general strike tactic had been discussed in the summer of 1908 (and occasionally before). The LO's chairman, Herman Lindqvist, was most sceptical: 'the very idea of a general strike was tantamount to suicide for the trade union movement.'<sup>101</sup> By autumn 1908, the most prominent representatives looked upon it differently. The bookbinders were involved in a conflict and Ernst Söderberg, LO treasurer, claimed that the LO now had to choose between

a lingering disease or a rapid inflammation. If we make martyrs of the bookbinders, then syndicalism will ride on the crest of the wave, because it will awaken the feeling that we [the LO leadership] are oppressors interested only in stopping the workers from achieving their goals through battle. Therefore, if we let them have their way, the members may themselves have the opportunity to see how unwise the battle was. In this way we could probably remove existing discontent.<sup>102</sup>

Lindqvist was of the same opinion: if the workers were so eager to fight, then they should have their battle – a battle which most likely would dampen syndicalist and other leftist radical opinions.<sup>103</sup> Jörgen Westerståhl has argued that neither Lindqvist nor Söderberg changed their minds between

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99 'The domestic distribution [by train] has practically ceased ... Maritime traffic is equally affected by the strike. A number of ships have been taken out of traffic, and the ships still operating are making even bigger losses, on every single trip' (*Svaret*, 15 August 1909). A few days later, it was once again declared that railway traffic 'has practically ceased' (*Svaret*, 18 August 1909).

100 L. K. Persson, *Syndikalismen i Sverige 1903–1922* (Federativ, Stockholm: 1975), pp. 88–92. After the strike, the young socialists founded the new syndicalist trade union, the Swedish Central Labour Organization (*Sveriges arbetares centralorganisation* or SAC).

101 Cited in J. Westerståhl, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse: organisationsproblem, verksamhetsformer, förhållande till staten* (Tidens förlag, Stockholm: 1945), pp. 146–7.

102 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 147.

103 *Ibid.*

the autumn of 1908 and the summer of 1909, that is, they did not believe in a general strike as a method of struggle. In Westerståhl's words, 'they recommended this way out [in July 1909] solely because they were convinced that, in the long run, it was impossible to get the rank and file to accept the passive trade union policy' and, 'concerning the outcome of the strike, the representative assembly expected no victory; in the best case scenario, society [the government] would help the trade union movement to reach an acceptable compromise, in the worst case scenario a downright catastrophe was threatening.'<sup>104</sup>

For the LO leadership, 'winning' was forcing the government to intervene and thereby obtain an 'acceptable' agreement. Considering the strike's disastrous outcome, with workers leaving unions *en masse* – partly because of powerful pressure from individual employers, partly because of political resignation among members – it is difficult to believe that the LO *wanted* a defeat in order to set an example and curb syndicalism. In a comment made to the LO Congress in November 1909, Branting, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, even refused to call it a defeat. The result of this 'outstanding battle' was rather a more tightly united working class than before, now 'proven in battle' and ready to take back whatever it had lost as soon as the business cycle (i.e., the end of the recession) would allow it. Nor, he argued, had the labour movement's left wing managed to get support at the congress for its view that the strike had not been 'ruthless' enough.<sup>105</sup>

On the other hand, it is equally hard to believe that 300,000 workers participated in the strike just to get a 'compromise'. There is ample evidence of workers and local union branches all over the country demanding that the LO extend the strike. Several affiliated unions also protested against the centralization of the strike leadership within the LO. For the rank and file, 'winning' was much more than a government intervention to reach a 'compromise'; from their perspective, the LO leadership did far too little. The dockworkers definitely belonged to the most critical end of the spectrum.<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusions

The Swedish general strike of 1909 is one of the largest labour conflicts in European history. It lasted a full month and at its peak 300,000 workers were involved. The strike was impressive, but it lacked power. This paper has focused on one particular weakness, neglected in previous research, namely

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104 *Ibid.*, pp. 148–9.

105 Branting, 'Kongressen', *Tiden* 1 (1909), pp. 9–10.

106 Minutes from Landssekreteriatet, LO from meetings during the strike.

ports and harbours. Considering Sweden's geographical location, these were essential for the export of goods. Striking dockworkers maintained their unity: their participation rate was above the average in the conflict, yet exports continued. The dockworkers' disruptive potential was not realized. It was unfortunate for the LO that the workers with the greatest power were among the easiest to replace; the substitutability of dockers proved a reality. As argued above, apart from 'ordinary' strikebreakers – most of them Swedish, but some German and British – enrolled seamen played a key role on the docks. Although we cannot quantify the export goods loaded by seamen, qualitative sources leave little doubt that their impact was significant.

The LO's original plan was that the strike should be so powerful that the government would have to intervene to protect social order and public functions and, in so doing, enforce acceptable peace arrangements. At the same time, the strike should not seriously jeopardize basic functions in society so as to damage the LO's support among the people and, even more important strategically, turn the liberals in Parliament against the quest for an acceptable agreement. This led to, among other things, the ambivalent view on railway workers and typographers, and the decision not to hit the supply of electricity, water, street cleaning, and other services. Such an equation – to hit, but still not to hurt – was problematic from the start; as neither the government intervened nor a parliamentary majority pressed for an intervention, the strategy was a failure.

But if the strategy to take industrial action acceptable outside the labour movement was failing, why did the LO not increase its militancy and release all the latent power resources it had? Considering the devastating final outcome, what could the LO have lost by being more militant? One reason seems to be the lack of co-ordination between the strike leadership and several of the LO unions. Most notably, the LO's leadership and the important Transport Workers' Union failed to communicate effectively. There had been friction between Transport and the LO central leadership since the December Compromise in 1906. The LO seriously misjudged the overall importance of transport, not just the docks. A careful study of relevant sources reveals no discussion of ports and harbours in LO protocols or minutes before or during the strike. The frosty attitude towards Transport cannot be ignored; it was apparent at an early stage of the strike that it would not be enough to stop production. Although the use of violence to deal with strikebreaking was ruled out by the LO, other possibilities were available, such as verbal harassment and persuasion or political propaganda directed at would-be strikebreakers. But Transport received no support from the LO to organize such action, nor any requests or appeals to deal with strikebreaking. A contributory reason for the workers' defeat was the lack of international support. Both British and German workers were hired as strike-



breakers. It is not possible to discover if the seamen who operated the docks were all of Swedish origin; with the exception of the crew on *Gertrud*, there is no indication of nationality. As the shipping lines and crews were generally of the same nationality, there is good reason to suspect strikebreaking.

A few general conclusions may be drawn. First, a nation's export industries can be stopped in two ways: production can be shut down or distribution can be choked. In a boom, either will suffice. But in a recession, with large stockpiles – as in Sweden 1909 – transportation is the most factor. Then again, this is probably truer in earlier times or in less advanced capitalist countries where the just-in-time strategy has yet to penetrate production. Second, it is dangerous, from a labour movement perspective, to allow a potentially important group of workers – in this case, seamen – to lag behind ideologically. While the law of the sea was a fearsome weapon against would-be strikers within seafaring, it seems safe to assume that, if seamen had been unionized as much as industrial workers, strikebreaking in the ports would have been less severe. Third, previous researchers, most notably Bäckström, have argued that the purpose of the strike was unclear. This was not unique. With the exception of Belgium in 1913, general strikes, according to Crook, were 'seldom ... carefully thought out or prepared'. 'In the majority of cases', he argued, 'so little thought has been given to the matter that no definite aim or strict limit of duration has been set to the general walk-out before it commenced – an oversight that almost invariably has led to disaster.'<sup>107</sup>

What, then, was the nature of the 1909 strike? According to Crook, it was an archetypical example of an economic strike. This view has been shared by others – for example, Walter Milne-Bailey in his contemporary study of the British general strike of 1926.<sup>108</sup> This view is simplistic. True, it was an economic strike in the sense that the union movement's refusal to accept wage reductions was central to the conflict. At the same time, it was nothing like the 'pure' economic strike Crook claimed. In fact, Crook himself mentions two additional reasons for the conflict, none of which could be considered economic: first, the workers wanted to fight 'freedom of work', that is the imposition of managerial prerogative over labour; and, second, the leadership feared the internal consequences of not going on strike.<sup>109</sup> The risk that the union movement would have split if the LO had bowed to the SAF has also been noted by Schiller and Westerståhl.<sup>110</sup>

But there is another reason, not mentioned by Crook: the LO called the

107 Crook, *The General Strike*, p. viii.

108 Milne-Bailey, 'A Nation on Strike', *HSIR*, p. 156; this was written in 1926.

109 Crook, *The General Strike*, pp. 121–2.

110 Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909*, pp. 230–1; Westerståhl, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse*, pp. 148–9.

strike to counter the SAF's lockout strategy.<sup>111</sup> In September 1909 Branting stressed the importance of employer tactics: the strike was a defensive struggle of the union against – and here the chairman borrowed from the LO's proclamation – 'the lockout frenzy'. Branting claimed that the workers had received 'bleeding wounds', but the employers had been taught 'a lesson in the consequences of the mass lockout': the greatest achievement of the strike was to make future mass lockouts impossible.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, it is possible to see the strike as a more general demonstration of power on the workers' part. The Huss inquiry argued that the strike leadership intended precisely that: hundreds of thousands of workers with 'crossed arms' brought industry to a halt and made clear that 'the very same arms could take what rightfully belonged to them; that is, not only a temporary improvement, but power in the future'.<sup>113</sup> To summarize, the nature of the strike was multidimensional rather than just economic.

Luxemburg did not accept the distinction between 'economic', 'political', or 'revolutionary' general strikes.<sup>114</sup> She proposed a 'dialectical' perspective on the development of mass strikes. First, mass strikes usually start for economic reasons, mostly as wage struggles. So did the Swedish strike. Second, such a mass protest cannot be tolerated by the state or major business representatives, and is therefore met by state repression, which in turn leads to societal polarization and rising class solidarity. This second stage fits less well with the Swedish case. The 1909 general strike was the most extensive class conflict in Swedish history, but the political repression bore no comparison with that in Tsarist Russia, the country on which Luxemburg drew for her analysis. No workers were killed during the Swedish strike. Bloody Sunday, January 1905, in Saint Petersburg had shown that in Russia there were no democratic alternatives to a revolutionary overthrow if the workers were to win political influence. The third stage, the growing role of the social-democratic party and revolutionary propaganda, never happened. Following Luxemburg's logical chain, this is not surprising: the chain was already broken at the second stage in the Swedish case. There are, however, some Swedish peculiarities. Most notably, the Social Democratic Party and the LO were just two sides of the same labour-movement coin. The party had been involved from the start, and it was the party that initiated the idea that the strike should hit so hard that the government should feel obliged to intervene. As the whole idea behind provoking a state intervention was to get acceptable peace arrangements, revolutionary propaganda was never on the agenda.

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111 For a discussion, see Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909*, pp. 226–35.

112 Branting, 'Kongressen', pp. 33–4, 43. Branting's prophecy was not very accurate. In the 1920s and early 1930s – when Sweden became renowned for its high level of industrial conflicts – lockouts and mixed conflicts constituted almost half of total 'days lost'.

113 Huss, *Redogörelse för lockouterna ochorstrejken 1909*, I, p. 97.

114 See also Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*, pp. 36–8.

Yet the question remains as to what would have happened if the political and trade-union leadership had abandoned the strategy not to annoy the liberals in Parliament even when it was clear that the government was not going to intervene to stop the strike. The outcome might have been different if the strike leaders had had more faith in what Luxemburg called the ‘inner dynamics’ of the mass strike, and had considered her argument that as long as the general strike was fought ‘within the fetters of legality’ it was ‘like a war demonstration with cannons whose charge has been dumped into a river within the very sight of the enemy’.<sup>115</sup>

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We are grateful for comments by Dave Lyddon, Jan Ottosson, Bernt Schiller, and Paul Smith, the two referees, and our colleagues at the Department of Economic History in Gothenburg. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the ‘Strikes and Social Conflicts in the Twentieth Century’ Conference, Lisbon, 2011, and at the Swedish Economic History Meeting, Gothenburg, 2011. All translations, with two exceptions (notes 22 and 115), are by the authors.

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115 Luxemburg, ‘Das belgische Experiment’, p. 341. English translation by Hoornweg in Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 129.