

**Speech by LO President Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson
at the 29th Congress of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO**

Check against delivery

Power.

That was the first word in my speech as newly elected LO President.
It will also be my first word as I hand over the Presidency.

Eight years can pass quickly, and they seem to move faster the older you get.
They can also feel like a long time. A lot has happened since 2012.

But what I said in my speech then is still valid.
Because power is fundamentally what our trade union work is all about.

And I am not thinking of the power of LO's leadership.

I am thinking of our 1.4 million members.
Not least the tens of thousands who have now lost their jobs.

What power do they have?
Over their lives? In society?

Because unemployment is not just about the economy.
It is also about power. Empowerment.

When work is scarce, you are forced to accept the jobs that exist,
on the terms the employer offers.

Demands are held back then.

Then we must stay silent and accept.

So it is not difficult to understand the attacks on our job security and our unemployment insurance funds that are being made now.

On the other hand, when there are plenty of jobs, people have the power.

Power to make demands. The power over your life you get from earning your own living.

Unemployment not only harms people. It harms our entire society.

It harms democracy. In societies where more and more people are excluded from the community, impotence and desperation grow. The enemies of democracy thrive there. We have seen it before. Extreme movements, to the left and to the right, are nourished by hopelessness.

It harms welfare. Our common welfare is only paid for through work for everyone.

It harms the national economy. It is people's work that creates the growth we need to build a strong business sector.

In fact, I believe that the historical successes of the labour movement are largely explained by our having had a very good idea:

Work and earn your own living.

I have met an enormous number of people in my years as LO President.

The most difficult meetings were with people who had lost their job, and not found another.

Here is a difference I have often thought about. Those who have work can go pretty hard on an LO President. They can tear me off a strip and be bossy, but also laugh along with me.

But the unemployed don't do that. They don't have the confidence.

They are much harder to reach. Unemployment can break people.

Though it has now been more than 40 years since my first day at work, I still remember exactly how much I was paid: 15 kronor and 92 öre per hour.

I used my first wages to buy an East German Practica camera.

I'm not sure it was such a good buy, but that is not what's important.

The important thing was that I could decide for myself. I had my own income.

In 2012 we could look back at six lost years with a Government led by the Moderate Party.

Six years of growing unemployment.

Tripled long-term unemployment.

25 per cent youth unemployment.

So we decided that the overshadowing question in the coming years would be the struggle for work for everyone.

We started our extensive project on full employment and the wage policy of solidarity.

We presented concrete proposals on investments.

SEK 70 billion to:

Strengthen welfare.

Build housing, roads and railways.

Repair the social security systems.

Thanks to our trade union-political cooperation,
thanks to getting a Social Democratic-led Government,
we achieved what so many thought was impossible.

We pushed down unemployment.

LO was right!

So I think they should have learned one thing by now,
all those people who rejected our proposals:

LO is, has always been and will always be right!

So just a few months ago I used to say, in speeches and interviews, that we were on the road
to full employment again.

But something no-one had foreseen happened.
Corona happened.

The virus struck and demolished
lives, jobs and livelihoods.

When I took office as LO President it was about unemployment.
As I leave office as LO President it is – again – about unemployment.

Friends,

The fight for work for everyone is as old as the trade union movement itself.
If we lose that fight, we lose everything.

Our objective can be expressed in economic terms, with bar charts and figures.

But it can also be expressed like this:

In the morning you should get up and go to work.

Because someone requires your knowledge.

You are seen and you are needed.

That's how it should be in a good society.

Unemployment is also about equality, our second big issue in these years.

The ability of everyone to support themselves is among the most important elements of building an equal society.

In equal societies people trust each other.

In equal societies we perform better at school, are healthier and live longer.

In equal societies there is less violence and crime.

Nevertheless, inequality has increased dramatically.

It was a long time ago that Sweden was the world's most equal country.

It's about class. But it's also about gender.

Today, a woman in an LO occupation on average has SEK 6,075 less in actual income than a man in an LO occupation. Every month.

That is SEK 72,900 per year.

Eighty five per cent of the men in LO occupations work full time, but only a little more than half of the women.

And that is not because women choose part-time.

It is because they are not offered full time. Or they are too worn out to manage it.

The struggle for gender-equal equality requires political reforms.

It requires a strong trade union movement that succeeds in equalising pay differentials in its collective bargaining rounds.

It also requires trade union renewal.

When I look at the speech I held as newly elected President in 2012 I see that I listed the names of everyone in the newly elected LO Executive Council. And I noted that there were more Anders on the Executive Council than there were women.

On that particular point at least quite a lot has happened.

There are no Anders left among the ordinary members of the Executive Council.

But above all, seven out of 18 on the Executive Council are women.

And we have a majority of women in the LO leadership.

This is historic. Has never happened before.

When I was elected LO President I remember something that Torbjörn said to me: Did you come to LO to change commas or to change your members' conditions?

I don't remember what I answered, but I certainly wanted to do more than change commas.

So how did it go?

When I look back on these eight years I remember both victories and defeats.

I remember negotiations with the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, meetings with ministers and party leaders.

Even presidents.

I remember the meeting with young people in Fridays for Future. Their commitment and their impressive knowledge of the climate issue. Of course we joined the demonstration. Because the climate is also a trade union issue. There must be climate change, and its costs must be shared equally.

I remember our important international work. Experiences I now take with me as I continue as Deputy President of the International Trade Union Confederation.

How the women at the Brick Factory in Nepal did all the heavy work while the men worked at the machines. And the hopeful Nepalese I met who were going to Qatar and other kafala countries as migrant workers.

How we discussed the social conditions in Europe in Gothenburg in 2017. Stefan Löfven had invited both the social partners and EU governments to a Social Summit there.

How we had both US Trade Representative Froman and European Commissioner Malmström at the LO headquarters to discuss the TTIP free trade agreement, and they both went aside to sketch out an agreement. On a napkin from LO's inner courtyard.

But what I will carry with me more than anything else is all the meetings with LO members and elected representatives.

The newly arrived immigrant in Örnköldsvik who had swum to Greece from Turkey. Now he was combining Swedish lessons with work.

Musa, who fled Homs in Syria and ended up alone in Hässleholm. Started studying Swedish and got a trainee job at the kitchen and bathroom manufacturer Ballingslöv. When I met him there he was taking a coffee break with his workmates. He had got a permanent job!

When last year I had the honour of awarding our first trade union scholarship for trade union feminism, to the Union for Service and Communications Employees Seafarers and to

the Building Workers' Union, Building Maintenance Workers' Union and the Electricians' Union in Värmland.

When in 2017 I met the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union club at the Gothia Towers hotel in Gothenburg, in the middle of the bargaining round. And how they told me that employees had received a letter from the employer asking them to state whether they were trade union members or not.

The security guards Danne and Jonathan in Liljeholmen who spoke about the job as a guard. About threats and violence but also about the joy of being there for people in everyday life.

The woman I met in Hofors who became unemployed after 37 years as an industrial worker. The Public Employment Service thought she was too ill to work.

The Social Insurance Agency thought she was too healthy to receive compensation.

Though she could barely lift her arm.

She was forced to go to the social services office. She was ashamed to go there.

And I was ashamed. What kind of society treats a human being like that?

And I remember when I, together with the president of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation, visited Igelkotten, a home for the elderly in Katrineholm.

We met four ladies, the youngest 97, the oldest 104. But they didn't believe my guest was Japanese, "because you don't have a camera" they said. He laughed.

But we got hold of a camera and had a great conversation.

The paper mill in Klippan. One of Sweden's smallest paper mills. The Swedish paper industry has invested SEK 50 billion in five years.

Work experience as a truck driver in Västerås. The driver who was to take care of me during the day quickly realised that I would not amount to much in the way of labour. I turned up in

a suit and a high visibility vest. Was recognised at Hemköp, where I was delivering toilet paper.

And I will never forget the woman I met at my first Pride festival as LO President. She told me about her first trade union course with the Transport Workers' Union. About how they talked about the equal value of all people. "At that course I understood that I count as much as everyone else. That was when I dared take the step", she said.

Because at that course her name was Anders.

Now her name was Marie Claudette.

Yes, every human being is unique. We are the same and different.

We are women or men. We are short or tall.

We are born in different parts of the country or in different parts of the world.

We love men. We love women. Or we love both men and women.

But we all have the same value. In the trade union, in society, in politics.

Marie Claudette and Anders. Me and you.

This is also the core of the trade union promise they spoke of at Marie Claudette's course.

And that is what our collective agreements are about.

Everyone must be treated equally in the Swedish labour market.

Whether you are a woman or a man.

Whether your name is Svensson or Mustafa. Or Marie Claudette.

Those of you who have listened to me before know that I often speak about August Palm.

Some people maybe think it's getting tedious.

But I never tire of the poor tailor and agitator whose statue now stands outside the LO headquarters.

Master Palm's message at all meetings he attended was simple:

You whose clothes are worn out, you who can't afford to feed your children every day, you who cannot read or write – you are worth just as much as the well-dressed, well-educated and well-nourished owner of the yard or factory where you work hard every day.

We all have the same value. And if we organise, we can create a society where we are also treated as such.

August Palm's words still apply today and in the future. They will never be out of date.

For the fight for everyone's equal value is the labour movement's most powerful driving force. That's how it was when we formed our first trade unions. And that's how it is today.

That dream takes us forward. To the place they say doesn't exist.

But we don't believe them. Because we are already on our way.

And we leave no-one behind.

Now it's time for me to say goodbye and thank you.

In these situations the person stepping down usually gives good advice to their successor.

I find that sort of thing irritating, so I will refrain.

But I will make one single exception.

One piece of advice to you, Susanna:

Never let the LO Executive Council stop meeting at least every other week.

That is important for the discussions. If the meetings take place sufficiently often they will continue, and you can pick up where you left off last Monday. It will be an ongoing conversation. And we need that.

So thank you for all the conversations.

Thank you for all the trust you have put in me.

And thank you too for the fights we have had.

I have learned from everything.

I will now pass on the BIG KEY TO THE LO HEADQUARTERS.

Or rather, the little white tag that now replaces the key.

It's for Susanna.

And I will go to my room in the LO headquarters and take down the picture I have always had with me in all my jobs and assignments.

It says the important things I intend never to forget:

Work instead of benefits

Activity instead of passivity

Integration instead of segregation

Empowerment instead of powerlessness

Thank you!