

## **Speech by New LO President Susanna Gideonsson at the 29th Congress of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, 2020**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Comrades, Congress Delegates,

Again, a big, warm thank you for putting your confidence in me.

You know what these kinds of speeches are like.  
A dramatic story about what it was like when you joined the union.  
About injustices that needed to be stopped. Workmates to be saved.  
About bloody-minded employers.

But it wasn't like that for me.

I joined because you were supposed to.  
Where I come from, that was just the way it was.  
“Don't grumble. There's lots to do. Nothing to whine about. Just keep going.”  
That's what I grew up with, and that is how my life has continued.

If you want something done, you have to join in and lend a hand.  
So when I started work I joined the trade union.  
There was no more to it than that.

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These speeches usually also start with the newly elected President speaking about how the next four years will be.

I am not going to do that.

Because that is not for me alone to decide.  
I have not yet sat down with the three other members of the leadership we elected here today.  
I have not yet called together the LO Executive Council.  
I have not yet had time to speak to elected representatives in the national unions and LO Districts.  
And we also have a lot of Congress resolutions that have not yet been passed.

I am convinced that it is together with others that we become strong and can make changes.  
This also applies to an LO President.  
So first I want to listen and talk.  
Then I can make speeches.  
Where I can present a direction we are agreed on.

Today I can make it clear what is important for me in those conversations.

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Comrades,

In recent years we in the trade unions have been faced with growing “challenges”, as they are called.

Developments in society and politics have not favoured us or our cause.

But we have reacted with less, instead of more, cohesion.

In the last collective bargaining round there was a breakdown in coordination. Again.

We have been divided about job security and job transition.

This is a pattern we need to change.

To fight for better conditions we must stand united.

Otherwise, we won't succeed.

This is not something that I as the new President can do alone.

But I know that we can do it together.

And we must.

Because if not us, then who?

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Friends,

Another “challenge” we have is that fewer and fewer are joining our national unions.

It's no wonder, when the trade union talk has fallen silent at many workplaces.

There are several reasons.

Fear of losing your insecure employment.

Or you never actually meet any workmates to talk to.

Because that's what work schedules and staffing are often like today.

The other day there was a report that foreign-born people to a decreasing degree are members of trade unions.

This is the explanation:

They often work in sectors where people don't meet; taxis, hotels, restaurants and home help services.

Where organisation is difficult generally.

If we let it continue we lose experiences we really need.

This is a reality we must understand and relate to.

The employers and politicians have changed our conditions.

But there is no point in complaining that “people don't join unions”.

We are the ones who need to change our way of working.

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It is the national unions that organise members.  
You know your industries and know your workplaces.

LO's task is to give you the best possible conditions.

LO is to raise awareness and drive public opinion on trade union issues.  
We are to create arenas for you to exchange experiences and learn from each other.  
And together we will have an impact on collective bargaining, as well as on policy.  
When we are both seen and deliver, ordinary people will notice that trade union  
commitment makes a difference.  
Then there is a reason to join.

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Friends,

What is the trade union?

You and I know that the trade union is the members of the club,  
the safety representative at the workplace,  
All of us together when we join forces to take power over our working conditions,  
together to change our lives and our society.  
You and I, we know the full potential of membership.

But the one who is new seldom knows this.  
The one who came in the wake of the consequences of the corona epidemic.  
She perhaps thinks that the union is not her.  
That the union is an insurance company or the labour market police.  
And misses all the opportunities she has together with us.

That's why we need to be better at showing what the trade union really is.  
We have something to offer that is in very short supply in many people's lives –  
meaning, community and power.

We need to be many.  
We need to be strong.  
And, we need to be united.

To get there I want to contribute clear leadership, an open climate, and straight discussions.

As LO President my first priority is a united and strong trade union movement.

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Comrades,

In society at large as well, cohesion is preferable to division.

Equal societies are quite simply better.  
People are more healthy, live longer and feel safer.  
The economy grows and we have more to distribute.  
Equality is not just right. It is also smart.

We all know this, but nevertheless the trend is in the completely opposite direction.  
Now there must be an end to the neoliberal playgrounds.  
Both in Sweden and the world.

But as many have stated in many speeches for many years now: It doesn't have to go on like this.  
We can take back equality.

I say: to succeed we must be better at "keeping going and lending a hand".  
We must do more to shoulder our responsibility to bring about change.

It's time for the strong society to make a comeback!  
A society where we take care of each other, and no-one is left alone.  
Where we cooperate instead of competing.  
Where equality is not just a fine word in a formal speech, but reality.

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Therefore, we require full focus and active measures to achieve full employment.  
A job and a living wage for everyone is a fundamental pillar in the structure of an equal society and in defence of the trade union promise.

We also require strong unemployment insurance funds and sickness insurance worth the name.

No-one who falls ill or loses their job should be destitute.  
The crisis packages that have come with the corona crisis are good, not least as regards unemployment benefit.  
But they must be made permanent and be a floor from which we will continue upwards.

Sweden's unemployment compensation is now worse than the EU average.  
We can't have that.

It must be easy to qualify for unemployment insurance,  
the compensation should be good and it should be good over time.  
The unemployment insurance funds must be further strengthened.  
It is a matter of security for ordinary people.  
But also of sound economic common sense.

And even if the unemployment insurance funds are strengthened, they only do half the job.

Consequently, we also call for good opportunities for skills development and job transition. Both climate change and the corona crisis are evidence of the need.

We also call for the rich to pay more.

Higher tax on capital income is an obvious first step.

It is because of these incomes that the richest people have drawn ahead and widened the gaps.

We call for substantial public investments in housing and infrastructure.

In electricity, the internet and railways.

It is about being able to live anywhere in the country.

And about creating jobs in an economic downturn.

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Finally, we call for generous and general welfare.

With permanently increased resources.

Because something has gone very wrong.

I understood the seriousness of the situation, when an acquaintance from the inland of Västerbotten said to me that she felt she was a burden on society.

This was when she was going to give birth to a baby.

There were not enough beds.

It was several Swedish miles to the nearest maternity unit.

And the queue for childcare was long.

That is how many people feel today who need medical care or welfare.

That they are a burden.

I wonder: Where are we heading? What have we done to our society?

Women giving birth should not be ashamed.

They should be proud of bringing another human being into the world.

Our welfare is not a burden. It is a right.

Our welfare is not an expense. It's an investment.

But above all, part of the very meaning of everything.

And a tool for a more equal society.

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If my first priority was a strong and unified trade union movement, my second priority is: even more stubborn and persistent work – to increase equality in Sweden.

Both in the labour market and in society in general.

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Comrades,

Equality is also where I start in the defining issue of our time:  
The global climate crisis.

Because even in this crisis, rich people can buy themselves more security than ordinary people.

In this crisis too it is the poor, women and children who are most affected.

This at a time when almost half of all emissions are caused by the richest tenth of the world.

It is a matter of equality and justice.

Of there being no jobs on a dead planet.

Therefore, the climate issue is also a trade union concern.

LO and the trade union movement have two tasks:

Firstly, we must make sure the transition is fast enough.

Sweden should and must contribute to achieving the Paris Agreement.

If we do not succeed, workers in both Sweden and the rest of the world will suffer.

Secondly, we must demand that the transition is fair.

The rich must contribute the most.

And ordinary people must be given the opportunity to manage both the transition and live a good life.

It is not possible to place the whole responsibility on the individual.

Everyone has a responsibility, but real change also requires cooperation and system changes.

Specifically, in Sweden major investments are required:

In green research and infrastructure.

In fossil-free production and industry.

But also in knowledge, welfare and social security systems.

That is how we equip people for change.

That is how we instil courage, hope and confidence that no-one will be left behind.

That is how we create a better future for ourselves and for our children.

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Comrades,

Do you know how many people in the retail trade have full time permanent employment?

What we call a normal job.

44 per cent.

Among women: 24 per cent.

Most people in the retail trade either work part-time or have insecure employment.

The normal job is not the norm.

There are contracts that run for one month at a time.

Sometimes just from day to day.

You never know how much your pay will be on the 25th.

You haven't a chance of getting a tenancy agreement, a mortgage or being able to plan your life at all.

And you are so afraid of losing the job you nevertheless have.

I have met so many employees who do not dare to ask a simple question at work.

Because they don't want to be perceived as difficult.

I have met employees who cry when the employer calls.

Because they haven't the energy for one more day, but dare not refuse.

They're not the exceptions.

They are a large proportion of LO's membership.

They are usually women.

And they feel powerless.

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Insecure employment contracts have increased in the retail trade. But they are everywhere: When the corona epidemic came, more than 10,000 fixed term employees in the hotel and restaurant sector lost their jobs immediately.

In the same crisis we have seen how staff agency employees, transport workers and people with "gig jobs" in various sectors are suddenly without a job or an income.

Elderly care has had a large proportion of fixed term employees for a long time. And now, as it is seen to cause the spread of infection, attention is being drawn to it, only then is it seen as a problem.

But in here we know that insecure employment is always a problem.

That's how it has been, that's how it is now, and that's how it will continue to be.0}

Day labour is back.

We used to stand hat in hand, today it is mobile phone in hand.

Insecurity has become normal.

The temporary has become permanent.

It's like turning the clock back.

Or being transported to the other side of the Atlantic.

The USA has the term "working poor".

Private nannies, McDonalds'-workers,

Gardeners and pool men.

They work almost non-stop.

But never achieve a reasonable standard of living.

Most are women. Many are immigrants.

“The American dream” is a nightmare in reality.  
That is why we must stop the misdeeds of neo-liberalism here at home.

Because if we don't take up the fight against insecure employment, if we don't take up the fight for those who are worst off – who will?

We must dare to see reality as it is today.  
The working conditions that exist today.  
And keep going and lend a hand to make a change.  
No-one else will do it for us.

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In the midst of the trend towards more widespread day labouring, in the midst of an economic downturn with increasing unemployment, in the midst of a time of growing divides, the right wants to worsen security of employment even more.

They praise this report on the Employment Protection Act.  
The report that gives 10-1 to the employers,” as Tobias Baudin says.  
Despite the fact that the January Agreement stated that balance between the parties should be maintained.  
I used to say that the Employment Protection Act is like a Swiss cheese.  
But with this proposal, the cheese would be grated into crumbs.

That's why we must never allow this proposal to become reality.  
LO will not accept any Government's worsening of security of employment.  
LO will do everything to continue to take responsibility for the conditions in the labour market in negotiations with our counterparts.

Why is this so important to LO?  
I want to highlight three reasons.

Firstly: These are questions that we – the parties – must take responsibility for.  
We have done so with great success for many decades, and there is not one good reason for politicians to interfere now.

Secondly: The proposals in the report are lousy.  
They would substantially reduce our members' job security.  
In practice few of us would have any job security left to speak of.  
We would all be on lifelong probation.

Thirdly: The proposals make it less likely that the parties can agree.  
If we do not succeed, the employer has a legislative proposal to fall back on.  
For us, it's the opposite.  
It is an unbalanced legislative proposal that in addition creates imbalance between the negotiating parties.  
The report must therefore be taken off the table. Into the waste bin.



And I would also like to remind anyone who may perhaps have forgotten: It was we – LO – that as early as in 2017 initiated negotiations with the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise on job security and transition.

That is before both the parliamentary election and the January Agreement.

Because we had realised that the Employment Protection Act did not work on today's labour market.

Not least with the form of employment called general fixed term employment that the centre-right government introduced in 2007.

In one stroke the conditions in the labour market – indeed the whole of society – were fundamentally changed.

We did not want it in 2007.

We do not want it now.

So, if my first priority was a strong and unified trade union movement, and my second priority even more persistent work to increase equality in society and in the labour market – my third, and last priority is of course to stop insecure unemployment.

In Sweden we should have secure jobs!

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And our vision is that a job should provide more than just an income.

The job should give a sense that you are doing the right thing and making a contribution.

It should provide a sense of community.

It should give workmates to share joys and sorrows with. And a coffee break or two.

You should learn and develop.

This requires good conditions:

Security of employment, functioning working hours, a good work environment, co-determination and learning on the job.

Every worker in our country should feel proud of the work they do.

Feel needed

And have the terms and the pay they deserve.

They should be able to happily whistle on the way to work, and whistle on the way home0}

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Comrades,

We are strong together.

Not merged into one. But together.

Each one with their particular strength.

United in common goals, then we are at our most powerful.

That is how I see us.

That is also how I see our relationship with the Social Democrats.

In my role as LO President I see reality from the check-out till at Hemköp.

From the cloakroom at pre-school.

From the concrete floor of the workshop in Hultsfred.

In my role as LO President I have been entrusted with a responsibility.

It is the responsibility of the union members' trust.

I will never back away from a fight for Sweden's workers.

LO's voice will always, under my leadership, be clear, honest and independent.

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Today the Social Democratic government is heavily restricted by its cooperation parties.

That is frustrating for us,

and I am sure for them as well.

At the same time the LO Executive Council saw this as the least bad alternative.

Preferably a Social Democrat-led government with the support of the Centre Party and the

Liberal Party, rather than four years with the Moderate Party, the Swedish Christian

Democrats and the Sweden Democrats.

But it must not lead to the impairment of job security by a Social Democrat-led government.

That's where we say stop.

But at the same time I am glad that we have a Social Democrat-led government in these times of crisis.

Crisis package after crisis package has been delivered, with reforms to protect our members, ordinary people, from the worst effects of the crisis.

Abolished qualifying deduction0}

better conditions for unemployment insurance funds,

more resources for welfare,

more places in education.

We are not a political party, but we have plenty of political demands.

Through our unique trade union-political cooperation with the Social Democrats we have the best opportunities to influence policy.

It would be a dereliction of duty by us not to use and strengthen that channel.

But no LO President does this alone.

It's best done by all of us together.

When we take our place in the party.

In the Social Democratic association.

On the Children and Education Board.

In the Municipal Assembly.

Trade union voices and experiences are needed everywhere.

Because we should not think that politicians – of any colour – are mind readers. They do not know the situation of LO members, or what LO members need, unless we tell them. Therefore I would also like us to talk to, and try to influence, all democratic parties. That is why LO must make workers' voices heard wherever decisions are made that affect us.

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Friends,

We are not afraid that our meeting will be interrupted by the police. That we will be imprisoned for exercising our democratic rights.

But that is not the case everywhere. In many parts of the world our trade union comrades are subjected to oppression and persecution, just for standing up for the trade union rights we see as natural. I'd like to mention one of them.

His name is Lee Cheuk-Yan and he is the General Secretary of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, we recently received greetings from. He was a guest at LO's last Congress, and we celebrated him then for his work for democracy.

Today, 15 June, he will be tried in Hong Kong. His so-called "crime" is that he stood up for fundamental human rights by participating in the protests against the so-called security laws the Beijing regime wants to impose in Hong Kong. Laws that severely restrict the democratic rights of Hong Kong citizens.

We will never accept the imprisonment of people because they stand up for trade union and human rights. We demand that the democratic rights of Hong Kong citizens be respected. We demand that our comrade Lee Cheuk-Yan be released immediately and allowed to continue his trade union work!

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Friends,

When the summer and the holidays are over, we have an intensive autumn to deal with. In the midst of reports on the Employment Protection Act, EU legislation on minimum wages, the corona epidemic and unemployment, we must also resume our collective bargaining round.

The playing field has changed drastically.  
Our counterparts will of course take advantage of the situation,  
and claim that there is no scope for meeting our demands.  
But they never think there is.

And the corona crisis has shown clearly who keeps society going.  
Without assistant nurses, plumbers and shop assistants,  
without paper workers, train drivers and a host of other groups of workers,  
Sweden would not have continued to function.

At the same time, workers have been on the front line.  
Risking contagion and spreading the infection.  
Now it's time to be paid for that.  
Applause is fine, but first a secure job and a decent salary!

All the new members who joined during the crisis have made us stronger.  
Now we will use that strength.

Our negotiating demands are ready.  
If anything they have become even more important:  
More money in your pocket.  
Higher pensions.  
A better working environment.

I look forward to fighting for them together with you.

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Comrades, Congress Delegates,

I wish I could see you all there in front of me.  
In the room at Folkets Hus.  
As it should be at a Congress.  
I want to look you in the eye, chat to you, have a coffee in the break.  
Feel our combined power.

But now it is as it is.  
And actually it is like ordinary days:  
Our combined power is spread throughout the country, from north to south.

Throughout the country our members are making the electricity work, building houses,  
dressing children's wounds and serving meals.

Throughout the country elected trade union representatives and employees  
are holding negotiations, safety inspection tours and training courses.

Throughout the country we are standing up for workers' rights and everyone's equal value.  
For democracy and equality.

And it is the sum of all these actions that create change.  
Sometimes it may feel hopeless:  
"What difference do I make in the grand scheme of things?"  
I say: You make all the difference.  
When you keep going and lend a hand just where you are.  
You are the drop that hollows out the stone.  
And together we form 1.4 million drops.  
And just now we are increasing our numbers every day.  
Together we are a great rushing river.

We are not victims.  
We have power.  
We must claim our right.  
Because it is our duty.  
Because if you don't do it and I don't do it – who will?

Together we will build a strong and united trade union.  
Recruit members like never before,  
and not let employers or centre-right politicians play us against each other.

We will build a strong and equal society.  
Sustainable for both humans and nature.  
Where no-one is left behind, and each can come into their own.

We will stop insecure employment!  
Bin general fixed term employment, the part-time mire and the report on the Employment  
Protection Act!

We will make workers' voices heard, in society and in politics.  
No-one should be allowed to forget who keeps our country going.

We will do it together. Because that is when we are strongest.

Thank you for your confidence and thank you for listening.

Let's get on with it, comrades!