

Why should Unions support School Libraries? The Norwegian model

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Abstract:

In this paper, I aim to show you how Fagforbundet, the union that I represent, is not only fighting for fair wages and working conditions for those who work in libraries, but is also working for the best of the library as an institution and for those who use it. I hope to demonstrate that we have a broader perspective on these issues than what would follow from a traditional understanding of the trade union's role. We are advocates of the school library (every library to be exact) , not only because we have union members working there, but because we think the libraries still is, and will continue to be, an important institution in the lives of many everyday men and women. We want to take part in shaping a better society, - and with it, a better library service. My union, Fagforbundet, is of course not able to accomplish such major tasks on its own. We have to labour for these goals and advocate these issues in cooperation with others: with other unions, with authorities, and with politicians and other branches of civil society. The key element in this work is the concept of social dialogue and mutual, responsible cooperation within the framework of a democratic society. I start with a few facts on Norway, to give you an idea of the context in which we work. Then, I will discuss The Norwegian model; why Fagforbundet, as a trade union, should advocate for school libraries; and the upcoming issues and fights yet to be fought. I conclude with considering “Strong societies need strong school libraries.”

Keywords: Advocacy; School libraries; Norway; Unions

Introduction

The Kingdom of Norway is a Nordic, European country and independent state. Its territory mainly comprises the western portion of the Scandinavian Peninsula. The country is long and narrow, and the coastline, extending along the North Atlantic, is home to its famous fjords. In total, it covers a relatively sparsely populated land of 385,000 square kilometers with just over five million inhabitants. The northern half of the country is in the arctic region, but the warm waters of the Gulf Stream spares us from the harshest features of the arctic winter. Norway is rich in oil, gas, minerals, lumber, seafood, freshwater, and hydroelectric power. The petroleum industry accounts for around a quarter of Norway's gross domestic product.

Norway is a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy, in which Harald (the fifth) is king and head of state, and Erna Solberg is the prime minister. Although Norway has rejected membership in the European Union through two referenda, Norway has maintained close ties with both the EU and the United States.

Norway is a unitary state, with two administrative levels below state: the county and the city/municipality. Norway consists of about 450 municipalities, most of them mainly rural communities with less than five thousand inhabitants. There is a political will that people should be able to live where they choose and still have equal access to public services.

The Norwegian school is public and state funded. Only a small percentage of the children get their education in private schools. These private schools are almost exclusively based on either confession or alternative pedagogies. There is a general understanding in Norway that a public school is instrumental in granting every pupil equal opportunity, whatever family background.

The Public Libraries Act requires all municipalities to offer public library services, which in general will be operated by the city/municipality, and led by a trained librarian. In addition to this, both the counties and the state own and operate library services to safeguard regional and national interest. The Education Act grants all students in basic education the right to access a school library.

Another characteristic of Norway is that there is a high union density. Nearly 80 per cent of public sector employees are unionized, while in private sector the number is about 60 per cent.

The Norwegian Model

Having supplied a few central facts about my country, I would now like to say a few words on this mixture of concepts and institutions we have named 'The Norwegian Model.'

The Norwegian Model is a semi-institutional system of social cooperation and negotiation, which has proved very useful to the country and to us living there. Norway is a high-cost country, and our competitiveness depends to a large extent on a well-educated and adaptable work force, and our innovation abilities. The Norwegian society is recognized for its democracy, almost full employment and a solid, public welfare system.

The Norwegians like to think of Norway as an egalitarian society, with lesser differences in standards of living compared to many other societies. Our school system is intended to support this philosophy. Among Norwegians, it is a widely held opinion that a well functioning system providing education and socializing for children and young adults enables a society where everybody can get a job and a earn decent living wages.

Industrial relations:

Industrial relations in Norway are characterized by strong organizations, a universal welfare system, and a tradition of tripartite social cooperation between authorities, employers and employees. Positive industrial relations are often pointed out as a main prerequisite for Norway's relative economic success. The general opinion is that industrial relations are well functioning: we maintain high occupational health and safety standards, a high level of labour

force participation, low unemployment rates, and productivity rates which are among the world's highest.

National collective agreements make the foundation on which the industrial parties cooperate. These agreements establish the relational rights and duties of the organized parties and their members. The employers are usually organized according to their line of industry.

The national trade unions usually have local chapters in each workplace where they have members. Most unions are joined together in a few large national confederations, but singular instances of non-confederate, independent unions are also to be found. The unions may organize employees in a specific profession, or with a certain education, or they may organize all employees within a certain company or within a certain line of industry (horizontal or vertical). Fagforbundet is a part of The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (NCTU/LO), and aims to organize all employee groups in the municipal sector.

The tripartite social cooperation:

The three parties that make up the tripartite social cooperation are:

1. Employees (trade unions)
2. Employers (and/or their organizations)
3. Authorities

Tripartite cooperation in Norway was formalized in the decades following World War II. Remembering the bitter confrontations, strikes and lockouts of the 1920s and 1930s, the industrial parties were willing to settle some central issues by consensus, in close dialogue with the government.

The tripartite dialogue was later employed in negotiating productivity development schemes in both the private and public sector, enabling a relatively low-friction transition to high-tech production methods in main industries.

Fagforbundet also employs this tradition of dialogue and cooperation to advocate more and better school libraries, as Norwegians are used to negotiation, cooperation and participation. Through these "ground rules," we are able to advocate improved services, point out areas lacking in funding and contribute to making sure that, for instance, new schools are built fully equipped to offer library services to both pupils and the public in general.

On local and national levels, the union may lobby for adequate public funding, ensuring that school libraries have both trained staff and up-to-date books and media, knowing the legislative standards are insufficient in ensuring this.

During the annual collective bargaining process, the unions fight for decent wages and working conditions for its members, including school librarians, being well aware that reasonable wages and working conditions are crucial for maintaining public services of high quality.

We believe that mobilizing the public opinion is a powerful political and democratic strategy. Such mobilization may be initiated through our own organization, at local, regional and national levels. The union may also join in on political action initiated by other organizations, social groups or individual citizens. Our union, as mentioned, organizes many different professions, and this enables us to reach out to people from all walks of life.

Why should Fagforbundet as a trade union fight for the school libraries?

Knowledge is power! To acquire knowledge and power, you really have to read. This may seem obvious to most of us, but at the same time we know that many children and adults have trouble with reading, and some of them will lose out on a sufficient education.

Well-known statistics tell us that access to books from an early age will have a major influence on the child's ability to cope with the educational system further on. The more books your parents have on their shelves, the greater is your chance to succeed in school.

A large amount of my union's members have no formal education. Fagforbundet has made it a matter of high priority to empower the "uneducated," by assisting our members in attaining a formal education. Having skills and being well educated will boost your self-confidence and supply you with courage to stand up for what you believe to be right or to fight against what's wrong. Reading skills and democracy are closely related.

Democracy depends on open and fair discussion, on equal terms, involving all citizens and institutions. We think it is important that everyone can access essential information and knowledge, not only those already blessed with power and wealth. Thus, libraries in general, and school libraries in particular, play an important role in shaping the future of our communities.

The reason for why unions should fight for school libraries should be obvious:

1. We believe school libraries warrant every child the access to the fundamental knowledge needed to become an independent person.
2. Children with access to a comprehensive school library will always know how to find adequate information and get their questions answered
3. Children need to be trained in distinguishing real facts from "fake" facts.
4. The school library may be one of several ways in which we can counteract social inequality.

Upcoming issues / Fights yet to be fought

The Norwegian Model offers possibilities through dialogue and cooperation. But even so, economical and political conflicts of interest will persist.

No victory is won forever -- we still have to watch out for attacks on our welfare system. This is even more important following last year's general election, which was won by parties aiming to weaken and downsize the welfare state. There are plans to privatize large parts of the public sector, thus making public funds available as a source of private revenue. The labour movement resists such privatisation plans, arguing that they will result in general money-wasting and public services of poorer quality.

But also during times when our political allies are in position, we are committed to fighting for our rights, for our members and for their communities. There will always be more needs than money to cover needs.

School libraries are “soft sector” institutions, and may easily fall prey to pressured politicians in urgent need of budget balance. Cultural and educational services may not be matters of immediate life or death, but weakening them will inevitably undermine our democratic traditions and make it more difficult to effectively counter the increasing economic inequality following in the wake of the financial crisis.

There has always been, and will still be, private companies who partly compete with and partly supplement the public services.

The union's main concern will be to ensure that public services are developed in accordance with standards of high quality and equal accessibility. As a labour union, we strongly reject the notion of allowing increasing differences in wealth and income to have a growing impact on shaping the future of our young children.

One of the main challenges of our digitized society is to distinguish real facts from “fake” facts. We are flooded by all kinds of information, from a seemingly unlimited number of sources. We need to train our critical faculties in order to cope with torrents of unsorted and often questionable information. Fagforbundet believes that the school library is a well-suited starting point for training the children in critical thinking. The school librarians require expert skills in teaching children how to seek out independent sources.

Strong societies need strong school libraries

Strong societies need strong school libraries – what can Fagforbundet actually do?

Fagforbundet has chosen to develop section organizing, in order to work more directly with issues relating to the professional skills of its members, and to be able to attend more keenly to policy areas such as education, culture or health care policy.

A number of Fagforbundet's more than 17 000 representatives throughout the country mainly focus on these professional aspects, and helps in making sure that relevant issues are adopted as official policy.

Fagforbundet's current work program states that we shall work to ensure

“accessible and comprehensive public libraries, offering equivalent services in every part of the country”

and further states that

“the library is a resource of great potential. In accordance with local demand, libraries must be developed into local hubs of culture, information and competence. Libraries must be given a role in regional development, and be equipped to accommodate cultural diversity.

County libraries ensure equivalent library services nationwide. Libraries should offer diverse services, and must be manned with qualified personnel, including where library services are offered by bus or boat.

Libraries must be given the right to loan out digital media.”

Our work program is not specific about the school libraries, but they are not forgotten even though school libraries “belong” to the schools/education department with different legislation and under different funding and staffing rules; there also are many common interests and challenges. There is a kind of misperception among people that school libraries are less important than the other school activities.

Our opinion is that the school libraries, and the school librarians, make the difference between the good and the best. We presume that school libraries are even more susceptible when it comes to funding because there are “only” pupils using them on a daily basis; they are in a way “owned” by the school administration. In a way it is more understandable and acceptable to reduce the school libraries than the public libraries. If a public library is threatened by cutbacks there will always be someone to react and protest. The youngsters’ voice are not so loud.

We use every occasion to follow up on our work program. Luckily, there is no lack of such occasions. One occasion is when we meet with parliamentary committees, especially during budget negotiations every autumn, or in connection with hearings as new bills are being introduced. We also maintain close working relations with politicians we recognize as friends or allies.

On a regional or local level we can work in the same way. Fagforbundet has elected representatives in all of our 420 municipalities. These representatives have the right to be consulted in all matters which may influence working conditions. The union's advisory staff contributes by supplying our representatives with information as a starting point for their work. Our policies must be founded in knowledge, based upon facts and statistics, combined with values such as solidarity, cohesion and care for everyone.

And, as a matter of fact; we can always do a better job on this issue. Our elected representatives have a lot of different tasks to take care of, and therefore they need concrete and current information.

In a world of quick fixes and superficial information it's even more urgent to have basic knowledge, and to know where you can find information not slanted or manipulated by commercial or political interests.

Google, for instance, is a commercial search engine, offering hits as a result of some actors paying for a higher ranking. We believe that libraries in general, and especially school libraries, have a very important task in teaching young people how to seek out unbiased and high quality sources of information.

In a world of such a massive information flow, it is crucial to be able to find your way through, and to make sure that you can access the most reliable sources of information available. Both young and old need to be aware that the librarian is there to help you with this. We have to contribute to creating a culture where using the library to acquire adequate information is second nature to us all, and this all starts in the school library.

I hope I have been able to show how Fagforbundet is working to improve the library as an institution as well as a workplace, and I hope I have succeeded in conveying that this work is not only motivated by our wish to organize those who work in libraries, but also by a sincere concern for the future of our children, our communities, and society at large.

Author note:

Mrs Mette Henriksen Aas is a member of the National Executive Board of Fagforbundet (The Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees). She was educated as a librarian in 1976 and worked as a librarian for children and youth from 1976-96. She was head of the Tønsberg Library until 2000 and has served as head of the Section for Children, Culture and Church in Fagforbundet since 2003.