

**Opening speech by LO President Karl Petter Thorwaldsson  
at the 29<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, 2020**

Check against delivery

Friends,

We are gathering for our Congress in perhaps the most difficult crisis we have experienced in our lifetime.

One consequence is that I am standing here speaking in front of a screen.  
And that the greater part of our Congress cannot be held until next year.

But these are the least of the problems.

The real problems are:

That people are falling ill and dying

That tens of thousands are losing their jobs

The Corona crisis is also an international crisis. Millions upon millions of people are losing their jobs in countries where there are no social security systems at all. Regimes and employers are using the crisis to attack trade unions and worsen working conditions.

Together with the Olof Palme International Center, LO and several of the national unions have launched the Borderless Solidarity fundraiser, to strengthen our trade union solidarity work.

You can see a Swish number on the screen here, we will show it a few more times during the Congress. And I hope everyone realises how important it is to contribute. There is also a

PlusGiro account that Districts and Branches can pay money into. Thank you for your support!

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Friends,

It is our members who are keeping Sweden going now.

They are exposed to infection in their work.

But they are also affected by the economic consequences of the crisis.

Many have been thrown right out into insecurity because they have only ever had fixed term employment or been called in as needed. But their bills keep on coming.

The Corona crisis should have made one thing obvious to everyone.

Sweden's labour market is not sustainable.

It does not work in a crisis, everyone has seen that now.

But nor does it work in an ordinary week when everything is jogging along as usual.

Sweden's problem is not that people have too much job security.

Sweden's problem is that insecurity has increased and spread throughout working life.

Nevertheless, the Inquiry on the Employment Protection Act now proposes even worse job security.

The Inquiry was misconceived from the start. It should never have been appointed.

The rules on the Swedish labour market must be determined by the parties, not by politicians.

The Swedish model, where the parties negotiate, only works when there is an acceptable balance in the labour market.

If it is disrupted, the potential for developing Sweden is reduced.

Destroying that model also poses a threat to the good order we have so far maintained on the Swedish labour market.

A model where the parties take responsibility.

Where we are among the countries with the lowest number of days of industrial conflict.

Where we negotiate instead of going on strike.

No, LO will never accept that politicians push through worse job security. We will not hesitate to take on that fight.

In addition, on this the three central organisations, LO, TCO and Saco (the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, the Confederation of Professional Employees and the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations) are in full agreement.

Our call to the Government and Riksdag is therefore clear:

Don't throw Sweden's workers into even more insecurity in the middle of an ongoing unemployment crisis. Let the parties settle on the rules of the labour market.

Bin the report on worsened job security.

This morning the Inquiry on future unemployment insurance funds also presented its report.

We are already among the countries of the EU with the worst unemployment benefit. If this Inquiry's proposals become a reality we will be relegated even further.

The proposal by the Inquiry on unemployment insurance funds can be summarised in one sentence:

Our unemployed members are to be impoverished even faster and forced to take any job at all, regardless of pay and working conditions.

The proposal is directly cynical. It must of course be vigorously rejected.

Both these inquiry proposals, the deterioration of the Employment Protection Act and the deterioration of unemployment insurance funds, are mortal blows to the Swedish labour market model.

This is despite the fact that we have recently shown clearly that the model works, and is needed more than ever.

During the corona crisis, we have so far signed short-term agreements for more than half a million employees

Without our assuming responsibility, hundreds of companies would simply have gone bankrupt.

Now the redundancy notices are starting to level off.

According to the Swedish Public Employment Service this is largely due to the short-term agreements,

to the fact that the parties have taken responsibility.

This is of course good news.

Those who seem to be emerging from the crisis fastest are industry workers. And that is important.

But let us not forget those who will not be returning when industry starts to get back on its feet.

All the people working in retail and services, often younger people with precarious jobs. Often women.

There is no doubt that the short-term agreements and the Social Democrat-led Government's support measures have dampened the crisis. But it is still far from over. Already there are tens of thousands unemployed and there will probably be more. Our LO economists fear unemployment in excess of ten per cent.

So we will have to do more. And I think we have good prospects of achieving this, thanks to having a Government that is prepared to listen to the trade union movement. Thanks to trade union-political cooperation.

Some of our opponents simply do not understand how the Swedish labour market model works.

They believe, as some Center Party members apparently do, that employers will hire more people if they can fire more people. Or that more people will apply for jobs if unemployment benefit makes them poor.

These arguments are not just unrealistic. They are fake news.

Throwing employees out into even more uncertainty and forcing the unemployed into poverty is also cynical. It is unworthy of a modern welfare society.

We whose starting point is the reality of Swedish working life, and not neo-liberal desk products, can easily show that this is not the way forward.

It is really not that difficult. Most serious business operators understand this perfectly.

But there are also those who do not care whether the Swedish model works. Because they don't want it. They have never wanted it.

They do not want a model where employers must share power with ordinary workers. They do not want a society where the interests of workers are put before profit.

They want a system shift. They want a fight.

And friends, we will not hesitate in the face of such a fight. We have never done that.

Because we know that we are the world's strongest democratic trade union movement.

So do they, that is why they want to weaken us.

They have tried before. But they won't succeed this time either.

It is now clear that the ideological conflicts that were put on temporary hold during the corona crisis are already on their way back. That we will have to fight for things we early on regarded as self-evident.

And already this autumn an important bargaining round awaits.

Employers say there is no money for higher wages for LO union members.

But they have always said that.

It's their job.

We will ensure that our members receive well-deserved real wage increases.

And that the gender pay gap is closed.

That is our job.

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Friends,

We are gathering today for an unusual Congress. We are not sitting in our usual congress hall.

We meet instead in front of our digital screens. I am here in a studio in Bromma.

And you are in Alvesta, Gothenburg, Hallunda, Heby, Hofors, Hälleforsnäs, Kumla, Luleå, Malmö, Sundsvall, Ulricehamn, Umeå, Visby and Åkersberga.

Of course we are missing out on something. Because there is something particularly special about meeting venues.

How they can be transformed.

I still remember the first time I attended a meeting at Lessebo Folkets Hus.

The smell of paper from the copier.

The bubbling of the coffee maker.

An orange tray with a long sweet bun.

On the tables toilet rolls instead of napkins.

The room was nothing before we got there.

But then! When the room was filled with people.

With laughter and conversations.

With discussions and proposals.

With the Internationale and the Swedish workers' song.

Something happened then that felt almost magical. For suddenly it was possible to change the world.

And that feeling is the same, regardless of whether we meet in a small Folkets Hus somewhere in Sweden, or in a large congress hall in Stockholm.

No, it's not really the same thing in front of the screens.

Though I hope that together today we can still join forces to recreate at least something of that feeling.

You delegates have one of the finest assignments anyone can have.

Because today it is you who are the highest leadership of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation.

This is your Congress.

But above all it is a Congress for those who cannot be with us today.

Who are working hard in healthcare and elderly care, driving people to work, serving in shops, manufacturing paper and other industrial products, comforting an unhappy child in pre-school.

This is a Congress for our members.

They have put their trust in us.

Now we will make sure we deserve it.

We will go through the Annual Report

We will decide on our Constitution

And we will elect the leaders of LO for the next four years.

So, friends, with these words I now declare the 29<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation open!