

Direct Participation in Denmark: The Positions of the Social Partners

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Abstract

Direct participation in Denmark has been facilitated by agreements between employers and unions as well as a prevailing consensus about the value of cooperative arrangements. A revised Cooperation Agreement was achieved between the central union and employer organisations in 1986. It seeks to improve efficiency as well as enhancing employees' welfare and security. This agreement has had a positive influence on the spread of participation in Danish industry. The paper examines, in greater detail, the experience of the banking and metal industries. Although Danish employers have generally advocated greater decentralisation, the Danish industrial relations system has retained a centralised framework within which direct participation has occurred.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to set out the positions of the Danish labour market actors regarding direct participation of the employees at the firm level within the private sector, with special reference to the metal industry and banking.

Denmark is a small country of 43,000 square kilometres and a population of 5 million. The economy is highly dependent upon foreign trade. Imports amount to 38 percent of GNP and exports to 47 percent. The European Community is the most important market. GNP has been growing during

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the 1980s and since the beginning of the 1990s. A surprising feature of the 1980s, however, was a decrease in Danish labour productivity, especially between 1983 and 1986. This drop in productivity growth was partly explained by the organizational difficulties of firms in implementing new technology.

The Danish Industrial Relations System

The Labour Market Organizations

The Danish labour market is highly organized with two main central organisations: the Danish Federation of Unions (LO) and the Danish Employers Confederation (DA). The proportion of manual workers and salaried employees who are members of unions is 80 to 90 percent, depending upon the method of calculation. Within the financial sector it is close to 100 per cent. On the employers' side, DA covers a little less than half of the total number of employers, within the private sector, excluding the financial sector and agriculture. However, DA covers around 70 per cent of manufacturing and construction (Due et al. 1993: 403). The Confederation of Employers in the Finance Sector is even more dominant within its area of coverage.

Since the end of the 1980s, the organisational pattern has been in a state of flux. Among the member organizations of DA, centralization has taken place. The Metal Employers' Confederation, the Confederation of Manufacturing and the Council of Manufacturing Employers have merged in recent years. Since 1992 the new Confederation of Danish Industries has dealt with both labour market and business matters, and it is the most dominant organization. Within the trade union movement, the Metal Workers Union has been a leading supporter of converting the predominantly craft unions into industry-wide organisations. A significant breakthrough for such a process has yet to occur, although there was the formation of a small number of large cartels from the beginning of the 1990s.

Within the finance sector, employers' organizations of banking, insurance and mortgage credit associations merged to form the Confederation of Employers of the Finance Sector in January 1990. One year later, in February 1991, a joint organization of employees within commercial banks and saving banks was formed, but insurance employees stayed outside this new union, known as the Federation of Employees of the Finance Sector.

Collective Agreements

Another important feature of the Danish labour market system is the consensus regarding fundamental principles of the relationship between the parties. The two main central organisations for employers and unions, DA and LO, recognized each other as legitimate collective bargaining parties after a historic compromise in 1899. After the Second World War, DA and LO agreed upon rules for cooperation at the enterprise level, and defined management's right to manage in a new General Agreement or Main Agreement. According to the Main Agreement, revised in January 1993, employers direct and distribute work in accordance with the provisions of the collective agreements and in cooperation with the employees and their elected representatives. Under the Agreement, the management of Danish enterprises must be carried out in cooperation with the employees and their representatives. This means direct participation by employees in one form or another, as well as representative participation.

The content of the Main Agreement is further developed in the Cooperation Agreement of 1986. The introduction of this agreement says: "The central organizations are agreed that continued improvement of the corporate sector's competitiveness and the employees' job satisfaction are a prerequisite for the continued development of enterprises and for enhancing their employees' welfare and security". Development and increased efficiency are joint aims for management and employees. The utilization and development of new technology are vital to competitiveness, employment, working environment and job satisfaction. The parties agreed to realize these aims through systematic cooperation between management and employees at all levels.

DA and LO as well as the Confederation of Danish Industries and the Metal Workers Union recognize that they have common interests, they support the development of new technology and wish to cooperate about the direct participation of employees. This is made explicit in a section called "day-to-day cooperation in all enterprises": The promotion of day-to-day cooperation is dependent on rapport between management and employees. Motivating management systems and active participation by employees and their elected union representatives are required for further development of cooperation. Therefore, the management, cooperation and communication systems should induce as many employees as possible to participate in arranging and organizing their daily work.

The Cooperation Agreement includes rules for the establishment of cooperation committees in enterprises employing at least 35 persons. The committee is composed of the relevant management and employee representatives, with shop stewards as ex-officio members.

Disputes about the interpretation or application of the Cooperation Agreement are settled through discussion in the joint Cooperation Board, established as part of the Agreement, and in accordance with the general guidelines governing arbitration in industrial disputes. The work of the Cooperation Board and its secretariat, staffed by consultants from DA and LO, is directed towards information and guidance together with the development of cooperation at the enterprise level.

Within the financial sector is a more recent cooperation agreement which attaches importance to cooperation committees, but leaves other possibilities open. The parties have established a Joint Council, corresponding to the DA-LO Cooperation Board, but with no joint secretariat.

Socio-economic and Political Conditions

After 1973, unemployment in Denmark increased to new levels. According to a study by LO, 62 percent of their members agreed with a statement that they were afraid of becoming unemployed. Within the finance sector, mergers between the largest banks and corresponding reductions in personnel have created a new level of insecurity among the employees. In the finance sector overall, employment has fallen from 70,000 in 1989 to 60,000 in 1993 (FA 1992-93).

Employment and unemployment mirror the competitiveness of firms and their sales. It is common knowledge that competition has been harder in the European Union (with a single market) and so the need for organizational and technological improvements is increasing. The key words are innovation and flexibility. The impact of employment and unemployment, competitiveness and renewal on cooperation at the enterprise level is discussed later in this paper. Vocational training is of the utmost importance for flexibility and renewal. In Denmark vocational training is organized as a joint enterprise between the labour market organizations and the state. Since 1929, a joint board with an equal number of metal employers and metal trade union representatives has had responsibility for the training of apprentices within the metal industry, and since that time the two parties have cooperated on the content and forms of such training.

After many years of social-democratic Governments, a conservative-liberal coalition came into power in 1982. During the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s a liberal policy dominated the labour market. In 1993 this epoch was brought to an end by the establishment of a majority Government of social-democrat and centre parties. The impact of the conservative-liberal Governments during the period 1982-1993 was that the views of the

employers gained political influence, while the position of the trade union movement became weakened. The policies of the conservative-liberal Government favoured framework legislation, decentralization and a wider variation in wages. This was illustrated by the course of wage negotiations in the public sector.

The political developments since 1982 has been called 'a right wing wave'; although not all Danish political scientists support this view. On the one hand, the generation under 30 years of age has moved to the right while those above 60 years of age have moved towards the left of the political spectrum (Gundelach & Riis 1992, 90-95). An investigation of LO members showed that members experienced a strong degree of a community of interests with the management at their workplace. Furthermore, the culture of the enterprise changed from an adversarial to a cooperative one while, at the same time, the labour market was characterised by an increasing segmentation (Jørgensen et al. 1992, 235 & 232).

In this brief overview of the Danish labour market, attention has been drawn to some factors influencing the positions of the Danish social partners on direct participation. There is a specific Danish industrial relations model marked by "a thoroughly organized labour market where strong organizations solve their conflicts of interest by negotiating and agreeing upon major framework agreements, which afterwards are expanded by the parties in each separate enterprise" (Due et al. 1992, 413).

The DA and LO are the most influential Danish labour market organizations in the manufacturing industries and commerce. Public employees are also of importance within the LO. The Iron and Metal industry is a major manufacturing industry with a large share of Danish manufacturing exports. As already mentioned, the Confederation of Danish Industries resulted from a merger which meant that this new organization includes iron and metal employers. The Metal Workers' Union is one of the most influential organizations of the LO and is organized along craft lines. Within the service sector, finance plays an important part even though it is not as large as commerce and social welfare. On the employers' side is the Confederation of Employers of the Finance Sector, while the Federation of Employees of the Finance Sector covers most of the employees in the sector, and is the sole union for banking employees.

The Labour Market Organizations and Direct Participation

Direct Participation

Within the DA-LO area, the employers and trade union representatives agree that direct participation means the involvement of the employees in decision making concerning their own workplace. The parties are also willing to use the term direct cooperation as an alternative to direct participation. Within iron and metal industry, the term employee activation is also used. Yet, there are differences between the positions of the parties. The employers attach great importance on the rights of management. This means that employers seek to use direct participation as a method to gain acceptance of the goals which they set for their enterprises. The trade unions, however, argue that employee involvement must mean real influence in the organization of work and development of people.

In response to a survey by the author, representatives of both DA and LO agreed that employee participation took place in a variety of ways including: via shop stewards, through cooperative committees, and directly by involving employees. It was also noted that agreements were the result of bargaining where each party had proposed its own solutions and the final result was a compromise.

Within the finance sector, the union's view of direct participation is that it is not the preferred route to employee influence in management decision making. Such influence is best achieved on the indirect level, and it is covered by the negotiated agreements. Conversely, the employers' side focuses on extended teamwork in which management at various levels allow concrete problems to be handled by the employees and let them find the solutions. Management then makes up its mind and takes the final decision. In other words, this is an example of consultation. The employees who are involved in such teams are those who have the necessary knowledge on the matter, and this usually means head clerks rather than bank assistants and office clerks.

The Iron and Metal Industry

Management-initiated programs of direct participation are found in relatively few organisations. However, research by the Danish Technological Institute and Roskilde University for LO, based upon information by consultants within a number of industries, revealed that group organization and job development resulted in increased competence and responsibility for the employees who were involved.

DA also noted there was considerable interest among management in quality circles. The Danish Metal Workers' Union agreed that it is not

difficult to get employees interested in quality, and that the union's own school for officials and shop stewards achieved an ISO 9000 certificate in 1993. LO stressed the importance of group organization and felt that semi-autonomous groups were valuable.

Semi-autonomous groups were introduced as an experiment within Denmark after a joint study trip to U.S.A. by LO and DA representatives in 1969. However, experiments only took place in only a few firms. The forms of participation included natural groups, project groups, and semi-autonomous groups (Samarbejdsnævnet 1972, 25).

In 1971-73 the labour market organizations of employers, supervisors, and workers in the metal industry carried out cooperation experiments as a joint enterprise in seven firms. Semi-autonomous groups were part of the project. However, these experiments did not result in a widespread movement towards the introduction of semi-autonomous groups. On the other hand, the management continued to be positive towards the involvement of employees through the formation of groups. These groups were often called production groups or improvement groups. The groups focused on job satisfaction even though the experiments were also directed towards efficiency and job satisfaction. After the oil crisis in 1973 firms were more interested in activities which had a direct impact upon improving their competitive position.

The DA-LO Cooperation Board (Samarbejdsnævnet 1983) reported on quality circles after a study tour of Japan in 1982. However, they stressed that quality circles were similar to section committees and project groups covered by the Danish Agreement on Cooperation (Samarbejdsnævnet 1983, 24).

Total Quality Management (TQM) currently exists within a few enterprises, mainly in connection with the introduction and improvement of ISO 9000 standards. The Danish Metal Workers' Union feels that certification with extensive written procedures of the work processes may hamper creativity and stifle workers because they are not all trained in using detailed written instructions. It is necessary that quality management becomes more user-oriented. Within the iron and metal industry the social partners advocate "employee activated production development". This is similar to TQM (Dansk Industri 1993). It is a program which the employers' organizations have worked out in cooperation with the unions and with state support. Its aim is to strengthen production, productivity and competitiveness by broad involvement of the employees.

Direct communication between management and employees is important, according to the social partners, because it helps develop a common language. Communication and individual task enlargement programs are

found in the form of formal talks between managers and their subordinates once or twice a year. According to the Confederation of Danish Industries, many firms use such programs in which training plans for individuals are discussed. This is reflected in the 1993 agreement between the Confederation of Danish Industries and the unions, which granted employees the right to continuous training.

The Finance Sector

The Employers' Confederation of the Finance Sector and the union representatives agree that initiatives should be taken centrally; but there are differences between the opinions of the two parties regarding the involvement of employees. From the union's point of view there is no place for semi-autonomous groups, even though they were discussed in former days. In banks, it is often the custom to describe departments or specific groups in the head office as teams; but much is determined beforehand, so the unions feel it is simply a delegation of responsibility.

The management of the banks communicate with employees directly and indirectly via the personnel circle; but if employees wish to respond they go directly to management or through their shop stewards. Individual task enlargement programs become important to the extent that they are part of a process of greater functional flexibility. Some banks have undertaken extensive human resource development of both management and employees as part of their training programs.

The Impact of Direct Participation

According to both DA and LO most of the effects of activities conditioned by direct participation are positive. They are very optimistic in the iron and metal industry regarding the connection between employee involvement and both productivity and quality. The partners stress that higher demands on employees may create problems if training is not undertaken. These problems are connected with the insecurity of employees because of technological changes, and their difficulty with handling a higher degrees of responsibility. Differences are seen between older and younger people.

The DA and Danish Metal Workers stress the linkages between the wages system and new methods of employee involvement. On the employers' side it is said that not enough has been done to change the organizational conditions so that people can plan their own work. It is also regarded as important that the results are reflected in wages. The employers and trade unions have agreed on guidelines for a wages system based upon qualifica-

tions and results. The qualifications part of the system is seen as an effective means of improving communication between management and employees (IA/CO-Metal 1990, 68). However, there is some disagreement between the employers and the unions, in regard to the spread of wages. LO argues that just as the wages system may influence direct participation, so direct participation is expected to have a positive effect on wages. LO also insists that wages should be negotiated in a forum other than the one which is concerned with cooperation at the workplace.

Framework agreements for collective bargaining are negotiated between the national organizations of employers and national unions. Through local negotiations, however, the employees may gain knowledge about the economic results of the firms. Employees also become acquainted with the language of business, which may mean that specific enterprise situations have a stronger influence upon employee demands than union policies.

In general, direct participation favours the development of human resources. DA stresses the importance of employees gaining a sense of being change masters. However, LO feels that a narrow focus upon work functions is not enough. New approaches must show respect for the shop steward and work environment representatives. This will have a positive effect upon human relations and the understanding among the employees of playing for the whole team.

Both DA and LO as well as the Confederation of Danish Industries and Metal Workers take the position that the cooperative committee at the enterprise level is the place where the management and employees should agree upon the framework for direct participation. Afterwards, specific departments and workplaces can put direct participation into practice. There is agreement about the positive effects of direct participation upon employees' motivation, as well as the positive influence of indirect participation.

The social partners agree that management is important for the advancement of direct participation; but management bases its initiatives on different sources of inspiration. Among these are public programs by Government and other authorities. These programs have been directed towards technological development, productivity and exports. Besides management's initiatives, it has been recognized that cooperative committees and shop stewards have played a key role with regard to direct participation, and the DA-LO Cooperation Board has acted as a social midwife.

The social partners point to firm size and technology as a positive context for initiatives on direct participation. Larger firms have the resources, and modern technology demands an acceptance of new ways. However, the social partners differ in regard to those factors which may hamper direct participation. Middle management may become a problem following the

involvement of employees in group work. Supervisors have to change their roles. Reactions can vary from acceptance of a consultative role to resistance to task enlargement programs. The employers' organizations see it as their task to educate the supervisors so they develop the capacity to change.

Both the LO and the Federation of Employees of the Finance Sector regard the employer's right of directing and distributing work as a hindrance to the development of greater participation, while employers stress that the right to manage is their prerogative. Both parties refer to the Main Agreement and the Cooperation Agreement. The employers contend that the right to manage is also an obligation to manage, and so far as the DA-LO area is concerned, this form of management is represented in the Cooperation Agreement. LO representatives stress that the Cooperation Agreement is not always followed according to the letter. They claim that the way in which the right to manage is practiced may become an obstacle to the involvement of employees. Behind the gulf between management and employees are found differences in education, culture, and social conditions. In 1990, the DA-LO Cooperation Board, in a circular letter to the company boards, stressed that prior information should be given to the cooperative committees before major changes are introduced (Samarbejdsnævnet 1990, 16).

Inertia plays a role in the labour market. Many managers and employees are used to the old ways and they may have little taste for different approaches. Some of the social partners felt that new ideas such as semi-autonomous groups at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s may have been introduced too early.

Within the finance sector other obstacles to participation were mentioned. The union representatives pointed to the reduction in employment since the beginning of the 1990s and continued job insecurity. This situation has focused union leadership and shop stewards on employment conditions, and employees dare not to raise the question of influence upon their workplace. Union members prefer that their union present their expectations and demands. They feel themselves squeezed in the hard economic climate. Another obstacle to direct participation is the way the banks present themselves in relation to their customers. They expect uniformity from one local department to another, and this may hamper local initiatives regarding new structures.

From the answers given to researchers by DA, LO, Danish Industries and Metal Workers, it appears that the factors encouraging direct participation outweigh the negative. Technological and competitive forces make it necessary to use direct participation to achieve a competitive advantage. Within the finance sector, the banks rely more heavily on managerial

prerogative, although human resource matters are influenced by the negotiation of collective agreements.

Debate and Initiatives

In 1983, DA together with some member organizations initiated a program called "Renewal from Within". This program focused upon productivity and organizational development including leadership training and how managers could involve employees in constructive cooperation (DA beretning 1983-84 & 1984-85). On the LO side, after their Congress of November 1983, union leaders worked on a proposal for a change in the Cooperation and Technology Agreement with DA (LO beretning 1984/85, 101). In 1986, DA and LO signed a new Cooperation Agreement. The two central organizations appeared to have reduced the distance between their positions. From the DA point of view, LO gave up its objective of seeking to control management while from the LO point of view, DA and the employers showed greater understanding of the need to change old styles of management. This meant that the initiatives taken jointly by the two central organizations achieved greater significance. These initiatives involved both the role of the cooperative committees and direct participation.

Within the iron and metal industry, Danish Industries and Metal Workers have cooperated on new forms of management at the enterprise level. Since 1979 a joint Technology Committee has existed "which supports the use of technology in Danish industrial enterprises with a special focus upon cooperation between the management of the firm and its employees" (Dansk Industri 1992-1993, 76). The social partners agree that technology and employee involvement are important elements with regard to promotion of the competitiveness of Danish manufacturing.

A program entitled "the Club of Good Examples" is an interesting initiative taken by the DA-LO Cooperation Board, on which both the Danish Industries and Metal Workers are represented. During the period 1989-92, some 10 firms worked on the extension of cooperation. Thereafter the experiences were spread from this initiative to other firms by various meetings. In 1993 the DA-LO Cooperation Board together with the Ministry of Industry arranged an ideas-fair where 30 enterprises told of their experiences with cooperative committees and direct employee involvement in order to strengthen productivity and job satisfaction. Managers and shop stewards from more than 200 firms took part in the fair.

This work has continued through a new joint initiative with public support called "The Cooperative Committee as Motive Power".

Danish Industries and the Metal Workers are currently working on a joint program which includes changing attitudes and information activities in favour of quality development in the enterprises. Danish Industries has direct contact with production chiefs in more than 100 enterprises and can be sure of a strong diffusion effect for its initiatives. Similarly, the Metal Workers is in contact with its local unions and in this way also to an extensive circle of shop stewards all over the country. The joint Technology Committee of Danish Industries and the Metal Workers has initiated the development of "the Wages System of the 90s", the series of meetings and the pamphlets on "Quality and Cooperation" and the project "Employee Activated Production Development" (Dansk Industri 1992-1993, 76). Danish Industries stresses its intention of devolving activities to the enterprise level so management and employees themselves will take the initiative on the basis of their daily cooperation. In this way a new leadership role will emerge.

A prominent joint initiative within manufacturing has originated from previous joint projects in education and training. According to an Agreement in 1993, Danish Industries and the Metal Workers recommend that the employees of the individual enterprises gain necessary training, and that planning of training takes place under the auspices of the cooperation committee or similar principles. The enterprises may use a jointly developed method of analysis called Strategic Development of the Employees, in which direct participation is one element. Both Danish Industries and the Metal Workers stress that cooperation about vocational training goes far back in the history of their organizations.

In 1992 Danish Industries asked the Institute for Future Studies to establish the necessary documentation regarding new developments towards the year 2000, with the aim of supporting strategic considerations of the enterprises. It is argued that "management is going to be an activity in which more and more employees are going to participate. The reason is that the necessary knowledge will become divided among more persons." (Dansk Industri 1992).

During recent years LO has worked upon "the development process in connection with work". It is a result of cooperation between LO member unions, researchers, and the LO Technology and Research Committee. By this initiative the trade union movement wants "to orient itself towards new goals which can secure the interests of the members from a collective viewpoint, and at the same time secure increasing individual opportunities for development at work – and in life" (LO, 1991).

LO wants to ensure that the development of the market and technology contributes to a strengthening of the participation by employees in the

decisions taken daily at their workplace, more self-management of groups, higher qualifications built into all functions in the groups, and a real possibility of seeing a meaning in what is produced. The proposal has been presented to the employers' side, which has declared itself willing to consider the proposal.

The social partners see cooperation at the enterprise level as a continuing development in which direct and indirect forms support each other. This openness towards cooperation is related to the small size of Danish firms, which means that cooperation is natural. According to the Metal Workers, such a situation makes it easier for the employee to take part in development, both directly and through the shop stewards. The trial of strength between the parties is not carried out by threats and open conflicts, such as strikes and lockouts, but through negotiations based upon the exchange of viewpoints and jointly produced information.

The merger activity of the largest banks in Denmark has meant increasing interest in the decentralization of union activities. But neither the employers' side nor the national union expects a development in the direction of direct participation in Danish banks. They recognize the representative system as the one which will mark the way in the near future. This means that working conditions will continue to be negotiated through collective bargaining. During the agreement period, smaller questions of disagreement may arise, and they will be solved by the national organizations. There are some new developments such as the establishment of the Joint Council. However, the union side is sceptical and is waiting to see how things develop in the future.

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted two conditions which facilitate direct participation. First, the social partners' responses are marked by the strong and widespread joint regulation by agreements between them. Regulation is not only directed towards wages and working time and various social benefits, but also enforces the employees' right to elect shop stewards, to be represented by cooperative committees, and to engage in day-to-day management. Second, there exists a widespread consensus between Danish employers and employees. In a representative investigation among LO members carried out by Aalborg University; 57 percent of the LO members felt that they had common interests with the employers in regard to the running of the firm. Such consensus is a strong facilitating factor with regard to an expansion of direct participation (Jørgensen et al 1993, 197).

Nevertheless, this positive picture of direct and indirect participation at Danish workplaces has to be modified by other information which shows that the conditions for an expansion of direct participation are not fully satisfactory. Resources are more centralized than is desirable for an expansion of participation at the work place. This means that shop stewards do not get enough support from their local union, and initiatives for broadening participation are hampered. On the employers front, lack of information has hampered the spread of experience among small and middle sized firms.

Within our investigation it is clear that the financial sector is moving slowly towards decentralization. Within the DA-LO area, some decentralization has taken place and more can be expected. A strong factor pressing the labour market organizations to decentralize is unemployment, which increasingly has become a matter of concern for the municipalities and the counties. Wage bargaining has also moved from the central to the decentralized level. As these developments continue, employers and unions will have to increase their dialogue about working conditions in general and direct participation in particular.

Centralization and decentralization is not only an important distinction to be made with regard to the national and local levels. Interviews with the social partners revealed the need for a form of direct participation within a single enterprise which is coordinated by some sort of overarching system. Perspectives for the future depend on knowledge of alternatives and/or an interest in learning from experiments.

Even where there is widespread consensus, it must be recognized that there exist differences of interests and views regarding the extent of employee influence on employers' decision-making. This can be seen with regard to the recent LO initiative concerning "Development Processes in Relation to Work". The central concepts include the use and development of abilities and knowledge, employee influence upon work and its future development, social contacts, security and meaningfulness (LO 1991, 19). To the extent that LO demands extensive written procedures to be followed with regard to job security or other aspects of the work situation, these are against the employers' declared interest in the most flexible working arrangements. However, LO seems to acknowledge the employers' viewpoint and are ready to act more as a consultant where there are disagreements between employers and employees at the firm level.

Finally, the social partners are operating in a setting in which there are high levels of unemployment. In such a situation the development of modern places of work demands more of their management and employees than many people can satisfy. According to the LO: "such a policy may make it even more difficult for the longstanding unemployed to enter the labour

market, because the demand for employees' qualifications increases" (LO, 1991, 23).

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