

“Human Trafficking” and “Distasteful Hijacking of People” Challenges to the Standard Employment Relationship in Norway

Per Bonde Hansen

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the Standard Employment Relationship (SER) by (1) identifying and discussing the changing content of the SER as a political and legal norm in Norway in the period from 1945-2000, and (2) by discussing how standards are contested, negotiated and changed by analyzing the strategies of employers and trade unions towards temporary work agencies (TWAs).

What is known as the SER became the typical employment relationship in modern capitalist economies after the Second World War, both in quantitative terms and as a political and legal norm. It may be defined as resting on three pillars: (1) a bilateral employment relationship between an employer and a worker, (2) a full-time position and (3) permanent employment. In this sense, the SER thus involved a relatively high degree of job security for workers. Against the SER stands the non-standard, or what is often referred to as flexible, precarious or atypical work, which, among other things, is characterized by a lower degree of job security and various forms of temporary work.

The norms for “typical” and “atypical” employment relationships were for a long time unsettled, and has repeatedly been subject to change. Thus, the phenomenon must be treated as dynamic and depending on changing historical circumstances. However, the research in this field has mainly been carried out by social scientists, largely related to the changes in the regulation of temporary work from the 1990s onwards. Based on sources from various archives collected in connection with an ongoing PhD-project in history, this paper will discuss the above-mentioned subject from a historical perspective.

The changes in the standard employment relationship in Norway in the period from 1945 to 2000 can be grouped into two main periods: Until the end of the 1970s, the main trend was that the protection against dismissals was strengthened, and the decline of precarious employment accelerated. From the beginning of the 1980s a new period occurred as the strengthening of the pillars of the standard employment relationship ceased. However, the standard employment relationship was not dismantled. Nevertheless, parts of its foundation started to crack. Some reasons that can be mentioned are increased unemployment and a less active policy for full employment, in addition to normative changes when it comes to the acceptance for precarious work.

However, the standard employment relationship was challenged also during its heyday. In the mid-1950s, employers in the engineering industry became aware of the TWAs. Employers, also in cooperation with unions, engaged in an extensive organized effort aimed at controlling and limiting the TWA industry. Important reasons for the employers’ resistance was that the TWAs contributed to increased wages for workers, but also because of the imminent threat of strikes and industrial actions from the workers and trade unions. Subsequently this led to a general ban against TWAs from 1971 to 2000, which limited temporary agency work to certain sectors of the economy. In that way, the bilateral employment relationship was confirmed as the “model”.

Short bio:

PhD fellow in history at the Work Research Institute at Oslo and Akershus University College in Norway. Also attached to the University of Oslo as a PhD-student. PhD-project on the changes in and negotiations over the standard employment relationship in Norway in the period from 1955 to 2000, with special emphasis on trade unions and employers and their strategies towards temporary work agencies in the engineering industry.