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FINNISH TRADE UNION ACTIVISTS BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS  
AND EVERYDAY LIFE

1. Introduction

The theme of our seminar - 'between institutions and everyday life' - is an extremely challenging and broad issue; after all, it covers the entire field that constitutes the object proper of sociological research. In this paper my concern is with one specific problem that falls within this complex field: trade union activism in a small capitalist country. Institutions and everyday life both form important context of trade union activity, whether we are talking about trade union activists or rank-and-file members who are less directly involved in union activities.

Earlier research on trade union memberships has largely focused on the most active union members, such as "ombudsmen" or shop stewards. This of course is understandable in the sense that these activists play a very important role in the union. As a result we have a fairly clear picture of who these activists are [see e.g. Borg, Pehkonen, 1982; Vähätalo, Lilja, 1977].

On the other hand, the large majority of the union membership: rank-and-file members, marginal participants and indifferent members have received very little attention in research work. Therefore, in the discussion that follows, my aim is to describe not only the Finnish trade union activist but also the rank-and-

-file member. My comparisons of these two groups are based on the results of SAK's Organizational Study Project [K e h ä l i n n a, M e l i n, 1987]<sup>1</sup>. The workers concerned represent the three largest SAK (Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions) unions: the Finnish Municipal Worker's and Salaried Employees' Union, the Union of Commercial Workers, and the Metal Workers' Union<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Trade union activists: Who are they?

On the basis of the results of SAK's Organizational Study Project [K e h ä l i n n a, M e l i n, 1985], we can present a rough description of the typical Finnish trade union activist. He is:

- a) male;
- b) 35-55 years of age;
- c) a skilled worker with professional training;
- d) he has less experiences of unemployment than the average member;
- e) his income is substantially higher than the average wage level of SAK members, and also higher than the average income of male SAK members;
- f) he sympathizes with the political left.

SAK's project and other organizational studies have demonstrated that the field of trade union activism in Finland is clearly dominated by men; women have so far remained in the passive ma-

<sup>1</sup> SAK's Organizational Study Project was carried out in 1984-1987. Its purpose was to compare the various affiliated unions' organizational structures and explore development needs; to study the implementation of rank-and-file democracy; to outline the rank-and-file members' conception of the trade union movement and to assess how the altered situation in society has affected the work of the trade union movement. See K e h ä l i n n a, M e l i n, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> SAK, The Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions, is the largest central trade organization of Finland with 28 affiliated unions and a total membership of 1.05 million. The largest individual SAK-affiliated unions are the Municipal Workers' and Salaried Employees' Union (180 000 members), the Union of Commercial Workers (120 000 members) and the Metal Workers' Union

majority. In the Metal Workers' and the Municipal Employees' Union, for example, male workers are elected to union offices roughly twice as often as women. This does not mean that women are less interested in union affairs than their male colleagues, but merely that the trade union movement elects men to union offices more often than women.

Looking at the age structure of elected officials (see Tab. 6), we see that the majority of the activists are over 30; only about 10 per cent are under 30<sup>3</sup>. The membership of the, Municipal Employees' Union and also the activists of this union are much older than the membership and activists of the two other unions: more than half of its activists are over 45, compared with less than one third in the Union of Commercial Workers and less than one fourth in the Metal Workers' Union. In the two latter unions, union office holders are for the most part 30-45 years old.

In terms of professional training, union activists also differ to a certain extent from the rank-and-file members; as a rule activists are better trained than the rank-and-file. In this respect the differences between the three unions are not significant.

As regards experiences of unemployment, activists differ very clearly from the rank-and-file. (Table 1).

(160 000 members). An estimated 43% of SAK's members are women; in the three unions mentioned, the share of women is 67%, 81% and 20%, respectively. In international comparison Finland has an extremely high level of unionization, with more than 80% of the labour force organized in trade unions.

<sup>3</sup> The following descriptions and criteria are used in classifying the workers according to activity: Office-holders are union members who are presently in some elected position of trust. Regular participants attend branch meetings regularly. Informal activists take part in the various leisure activities arranged by the branch or the union. Interested rank-and-file members do not take part in any activities, but they hold that the trade union movement is a useful vehicle in promoting the interests of the working people. Reluctant members do not take part in union activities and take a sceptical view on the possibilities of the movement to further their interests. Indifferent members do not take part and have no opinion.

Table 1  
Experiences of unemployment among union members  
(%)

Detail	Municipal	Commercial	Metal	SAK
Union officials	11	8	26	25
Regular participants	29	22	44	35
Informal activists	27	17	28	31
Rank-and-file members	31	30	40	37
N	1 632	618	551	10 097

Among the members of the Municipal Employees' Union, one in ten union activists have been unemployed over the last ten years; among rank-and-file members more than one quarter have been unemployed during the same period. In the Union of Commercial Workers, the proportion of rank-and-file members who have been temporarily unemployed is more than three times higher than among office-holders. The differences between the different groups are smallest within the Metal Workers' Union, where 25% of the union activists and almost 40% of the rank-and-file members have experiences of unemployment. These consistent differences clearly indicate that the position of the union activist in the labour market is far more stable than that of the average worker.

The SAK Organizational Study Project also discovered differences in the nature of the work of activists and rank-and-file members, in that the former enjoy more independence than the latter. In addition, office-holders are better aware of their rights, which in itself gives them a better chance to act independently.

Municipal employees have greater influence on their own work arrangements than metal workers. Union activists in the Municipal Employees' Union enjoy far greater independence than activists in the other unions, who actually have fairly limited influence upon their own work.

Table 2

Opportunities to influence one's own work  
(% of workers with a lot of or fairly much influence)

Detail	Municipal	Commercial	Metal
Union officials	63	51	38
Regular participants	53	48	30
Informal activists	54	52	30
Rank-and-file members	43	48	30
N	1 632	618	551

Union activists are better paid than the rank-and-file members. We have divided union members into five income categories: the highest and lowest fifth represent SAK's high-income and low-income groups; the three middle groups are combined to form the category of middle-income workers. Table 3 shows the percentages of workers representing the high-income group in each of the three unions.

Table 3

Percentage of high-income workers in different unions

Detail	Municipal	Commercial	Metal
Union officials	26	17	32
Regular participants	14	15	21
Informal activists	11	15	30
Rank-and-file members	7	9	29
N	1 632	618	551

In the Municipal Employees' Union and the Union of Commercial Workers, less than 10 per cent of the rank-and-file members are classified in the high-income category; in the Metal Workers' Union the figure is almost 30 per cent. In the two former unions, the proportion of activists with high incomes is substantially higher than among rank-and-file members, whereas among metal workers there are no significant differences in this respect.



Apart from these differences within unions, there are also marked differences between them: the proportion of rank-and-file metal workers who belong to the high-income category is higher than the respective figures for union activists of the Municipal Employees' Union the Union of Commercial Workers.

In terms of duration of union membership, all metal workers have been members of their present union for a longer time than the other workers. Among the rank-and-file members of the Metal Workers' Union, almost every other worker has been a member for more than ten years; in the Municipal Employees' Union and the Union of Commercial Workers, less than one third have been members for more than the years. In all three unions more than half of the activists have been members for more than a decade.

The trade union movement is an integral part of the labour movement or the working-class movement; trade union activists also take an active part in the work of the labour movement. With the changes that have taken place in society and in the social structure of trade union memberships, there have also been some clear changes in political identification, even though the clear majority of workers still sympathize with labour rather than conservative parties.

Table 4

Identification with labour parties\*  
and the working class (%)

Detail	Municipal		Commercial		Metal	
	Labour Party	Working Class	Labour Party	Working Class	Labour Party	Working Class
Union officials	69	83	59	71	74	89
Regular participants	50	77	49	69	49	86
Informal activists	52	65	62	71	50	83
Rank-and-file members	29	55	30	51	40	69

\* Communist Party, People's Democratic League and Social Democratic Party.

There are clear differences between the three unions in the support given to labour parties. Among rank-and-file metal workers, 40% identify themselves with the labour parties, whereas in the Union of Commercial Workers only 30% sympathize. The same pattern is repeated amongst union activists: around 75% of the activists in the Metal Workers' Union support leftist parties, in the Union of Commercial Workers only 60%.

SAK members identify themselves with the working class more often than with leftist parties. The differences between the whole membership and union activists is smaller in the case of class identification than in political identification. In class identification we find the same kind of differences between the three unions as in the case of political identification: nine in ten active metal workers identify themselves with the working class, while in the Union of Commercial Workers only two thirds of the active members consider themselves working-class. Among the union activists and rank-and-file members to the Municipal Employees' Union, the patterns of class identification are by and large the same as in party identification.

There are marked differences between rank-and-file members and union activists in political identification. Unlike union activists, rank-and-file members tend to be attached to the labour movement only through the trade union movement. As far as the labour movement is concerned, the central uniting factor is the trade union movement rather than the labour parties or other working-class organizations. Union activists are an integral part of the labour movement's institutions, rank-and-file members are involved only formally.

Elected union office holders are entrusted with most of the practical union affairs at the shopfloor level. Therefore it would seem reasonable to assume that office-holders also have more influence than other workers in matters concerning the union branch. To put this assumption to the test, we asked union members to estimate the degree of their own influence on branch affairs.

The results are rather surprising. Only one in two activists feel they have a high or fairly high degree of influence on branch affairs; the union activists of the Municipal Employees' Union

gave the highest ratings. The differences between the activists and the rank-and-file were considerable in all three unions: in the Municipal Employees' Union and the Metal Workers' Union, only one in ten rank-and-file members said they could influence their own union branch. In the Union of Commercial Workers, the figure is slightly higher (16%). All in all, however, it is clear that in this respect there is a widespread feeling of powerlessness among rank-and-file members.

Table 5

Percentage of union members with a high or fairly high degree of membership influence in branch affairs

Detail	Municipal	Commercial	Metal
Union officials	56	46	49
Regular participants	26	37	19
Informal activists	7	22	14
Rank-and-file members	7	16	7
N	1 632	618	551

### 3. Rank-and-file members: Who are they?

In the foregoing we have briefly described the typical Finnish trade union activist. We shall now move on to discuss the majority of the trade union membership: the rank-and-file members. The following tentative generalizations are also based upon the results of SAK's Study Project [K e h ä l i n n a, M e l i n, 1985].

1. Active participation is far less common among union members under 35 than among members over 35.
2. Women take part in union activities less often than men; this is due to the fact that women are elected as union officials less often than men.
3. As compared with supporters of the political left, participation is less common among members who identify themselves with bourgeois parties or who are politically independent.



4. Workers who have been unemployed on several occasions or who have changed their job a number of times tend to be less active than workers who have a stable job with one employer.

5. Workers employed in the private service sector are less active than members of industrial unions or even members of public sector unions.

6. Low-income groups tend to be less interested in union affairs than high-income groups.

From these general findings we shall proceed to a somewhat more detailed description of the rank-and-file members.

#### 2.1. Rank-and-file members in SAK

Rank-and-file members account for some 60% of SAK's total membership. However, it must at once be pointed out that the definition of rank-and-file is by no means very accurate, since within this category we can identify different degrees or levels of participation. One fifth (21%) of SAK's membership are completely indifferent to the trade union movement and its activities. Informal activists, i.e. members who only take part during their leisure time, account for 6% of the membership. Around one third of the members use their vote when union officials and representatives to the Congress are being elected.

All in all, more than one third of SAK's membership may be defined as rank-and-file members who take an interest in union affairs. Totally passive members or reluctant members represent about one sixth of the membership, and indifferent members account for slightly more than 10%. The proportion of rank-and-file members is higher among women than among men. Among female SAK members, 40% are interested rank-and-file members, 16% are reluctant members and 13% are indifferent; among men over one third are interested rank-and-file members, also over one third are reluctant members, and slightly more than 10% are indifferent.

The proportion of rank-and-file members is highest in the youngest age group, i.e. under 25: almost every other young union member is interested in union affairs. In this same age group, one fifth may be classified as reluctant members, and one in ten as indifferent. The number of rank-and-file members decreases with

increasing age, while at the same time participation in trade union activities increases. Young union members tend to be more often interested and indifferent than older members. This can be explained by the traditional policy of the trade union movement to elect its officials from amongst veteran members.

Table 6

## Trade union activism by age group

Detail	under 25	25-34	35-44	45-54	over 55
Activists	20	29	38	40	35
Interested rank-and-file	47	50	38	35	38
Reluctant	22	18	13	10	14
Indifferent	10	13	11	15	12
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	1 039	1 460	4 574	3 350	10 603

Over the past 15 years or so there have been some profound changes in Finnish society which among other things have led to a general decline of social activity: people (and young people in particular) are less and less interested in politics, and associations have lost much of their significance in channelling people's demands. On the other side of these developments, we have seen the rise of new social movements and various forms of grassroots activity. This situation presents a number of major challenges to the trade union movement. Most importantly, will it be able to recruit young members in the future to the same extent as it has so far? The general opinion is that unless the trade union takes determined action to change its course, it will begin to lose its members or at least have great difficulty in recruiting new ones.

## 3.1. The rank-and-file members of the three unions

When we look at the profiles of the rank-and-file members (Tab. 7), we find that there are differences between but above all within the three unions included in our analysis.

Table 7

Profile of rank-and-file members in the three unions  
(%)

Detail	Municipal			Commercial			Metal		
	R	L	I	R	L	I	R	L	I*
Has professional training	33	28	39	45	55	47	25	34	40
Has experiences of unemployment	31	30	33	31	27	27	38	46	38
High or fair degree of influence on work	48	50	30	49	45	50	31	25	35
Belongs to high-income group	9	6	5	9	3	12	30	13	43
Member of present union for more than 10 years	31	26	31	37	28	33	47	33	47

\* R - interested rank-and-file members; L - reluctant; I - indifferent.

The rank-and-file members of the Union of Commercial Workers have the highest scores for professional training, followed by the members of the Metal Workers' Union and the Municipal Employees' Union. Here it is not possible to draw any direct conclusions regarding the connections between training and attitudes to the trade union movement.

The figures for unemployment experiences are highest among the rank-and-file members of the Metal Workers' Union; in relative terms the reluctant members of the Metal Workers' Union have been unemployed more often than the other groups. The reluctant and indifferent members of the Union of Commercial Workers have the lowest scores for unemployment experiences. As a whole,

however, the differences on this dimension are not significant.

The rank-and-file members of the Metal Workers' Union have less opportunities to influence their own work than others: when compared with the members of the two other unions, there are differences of up to 25%. The lowest scores on this dimension are found for the reluctant members of the Metal Workers' Union, and the highest for reluctant members in the Municipal Employees' Union and the indifferent members of the Union of Commercial Workers.

Reluctant members belong to the category of high-income workers less often than interested and indifferent members. The indifferent members of the Metal Workers' Union have the highest incomes: almost half of them belong to the top fifth of SAK's wage earners. The reluctant members of the Union of Commercial Workers have the lowest salaries: only 3% of this group belong to SAK's high-income category (see Tab. 3).

Rank-and-file members have been members of their present union for a shorter period of time than trade union activists. In the group of reluctant members, less than one third have been members for more than ten years. Among interested rank-and-file members over one third have been members for less than five years. Over 40% of the reluctant members and more than one third of the indifferent workers have been members of their present union for less than five years. The differences between the rank-and-file groups are not significant in terms of membership duration: the chief finding is that reluctant members have been members of their present union for a shorter time than interested and indifferent members. Indeed, it seems that the kind of reluctant attitude which is typical of passive members tends to recede with increasing membership years and to become replaced by either an interested or indifferent attitude.

Therefore, as far as trade union activism is concerned, the member's actual age is clearly a secondary factor; what matters most is the number of years he has been a member. This discovery is of consequence especially when considering the attitude of female members to trade union activity. In Finland female union activists are older than their male colleagues. In addition,

women must have much more field experience than men before they will be elected to union offices [Mikkonen, 1987].

The social attitudes of rank-and-file members are less crystallized than those of the union activists and they are in general less interested in political issues. In the SAK membership, 69% of rank-and-file members and 84% of office-holders identify themselves with the working class. In the group of reluctant members, every other worker identifies himself with the working class. In the Metal Workers' Union there are more rank-and-file members who identify themselves with the working class than in the two other unions concerned.

There is a direct link between leftist sympathies and trade union activism in that the more active part the workers take in the trade union movement, the more support there is to labour parties. As regards support of labour parties, there are greater differences between interested and other rank-and-file members than between interested rank-and-file members and union activists. In the SAK membership, two thirds of the office-holders support labour parties. Of the interested rank-and-file members of the Metal Workers' Union, every other member sympathizes with working-class parties; among reluctant members the figure is roughly 25% and among indifferent members over 40%. The respective figures for the Union of Commercial Workers are 39%, 20% and 30%, which are roughly the same as for rank-and-file members of the Municipal Employees' Union.

#### 4. Trade union activists and rank-and-file members between institutions and everyday life

Above I have discussed some of ways in which trade union activists and rank-and-file members differ from each other in terms of their social composition. Trade union activity is an extremely complex phenomenon which arises from the interplay of numerous different background factors (see Fig. 1). In this final section, we shall briefly compare the social thinking of the two groups of union members.



## Economic and political conjunctures

social conditions:	working conditions and general situation at the workplace:	organizational culture:
gender	salary, size of workplace	size of union branches
age		structure of union branches
family status	working hours (shift work)	
social background	opportunities to influence work arrangements	organizational traditions
place of residence	nature of work	political atmosphere in the union
moving	objectives at work	position of union on the labour market
relationship to labour markets	social relationships at workplace	group action
unemployment		communication
professional training	scope of shop steward organization traditions at workplace	possibilities to influence union/branch
class identification political identification motive of membership		length of membership

## Trade union activism

- \* elected office-holder
- \* participation in meetings
- \* participation in elections
- \* participation in training
- \* participation in leisure activities
- \* attitudes towards the union

Fig. 1. Factors affecting trade union activism

Trade union activists are far more often members of various associations than rank-and-file members; as we have already seen, those who take an active part in the work of the trade union movement tend to be active in other fields of social life as well. There are, however, certain slight differences between the three unions in attachment to associations. On average, the members of the Municipal Employees' Union are members of associations more often than the members of both the Metal Workers' Union and Commercial Workers.

Union activists identify themselves with labour parties more often than the rank-and-file, whose political attitudes do not seem to be fully crystallized. The rank-and-file members who do have a definite political stand usually sympathize with labour parties, but a large part of them either do not know who they would support, or say they are politically independent. Identification with rightist and centrist parties is rare both among union activists and among the rank-and-file.

As regards the ordering of the most important goals of the trade union movement, there are certain differences of emphasis between union activists and rank-and-file members. Union activists tend to attach more importance to reducing income differentials and to the goal of full employment; rank-and-file members give priority to raising wage levels, the prevention of environmental pollution, and other "softer" values.

The majority of union activists hold that there are several issues on which the views of employers and employees do not meet. In the group of rank-and-file members, reluctant and indifferent members believe less often than others that such conflicts exist.

Union activists are attached both to the goals pursued by the trade union movements and to the stand and attitudes it represents. The relationship of rank-and-file members to the movement is, once again, uncrystallized - although here there are some significant differences between the unions. Activists believe their chances of influencing the activities of their union branch are much better than do rank-and-file members; to simplify the point, the union activists of the Municipal Employees' Union, for ex-

ample, have ten times better chances to influence branch affairs than the rank-and-file. Activists also discuss union affairs with their workmates much more often than rank-and-file members. Here, too, the difference between the two groups is extremely big.

Union activists see the trade union movement as a vehicle of social interests: through the movement, they can make themselves heard in the democratic decision-making process. For rank-and-file members, membership in the trade union is more of a civic duty, although a large part of them would in fact be prepared to take an active part if the movement was able to offer more inspiring and constructive activities. At the moment its activities have become institutionalized to such an extent that only very few members find what they want in the union.

The question of the internal differentiation of the trade union movement into activists and rank-and-file members is closely intertwined with other structural factors of working life, such as the segmentation of the labour markets, the gender division of labour, etc. As a consequence of increasing labour market segmentation, there will also be an increase in the number of union members who are not in permanent employment. This in turn will lead to increasing indifference and passiveness, especially if the trade union movement is unable more effectively to cater for the interests and needs of workers whose position on the labour market is highly insecure. In this situation the movement must seriously consider new strategies to develop and increase professional training, to raise women's wage levels etc.

Rank-and-file members are lacking in both knowledge and possibilities to take action. As far as I can see the trade union movement is itself largely to blame for the existing gap between union activists and rank-and-file members; part of its members have the opportunity to participate and take advantage of it, part of the members lack these opportunities. This difference cannot be reduced to the differential interest of these groups in trade union activity. The most important underlying factor is the organizational structure of the trade union movement: it integrates part of its members and excludes others.

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FIŃSCY DZIAŁACZE ZWIĄZKOWI  
MIĘDZY INSTYTUCJAMI I ŻYCIEM CODZIENNYM

Artykuł przedstawia wyniki badań przeprowadzonych wśród członków i aktywistów trzech central związkowych. Typowy aktywista jest mężczyzną w wieku 35-55 lat, wykwalifikowanym pracownikiem z wykształceniem zawodowym, rzadziej niż przeciętnie stykającym się z bezrobociem, o wyższych niż przeciętne zarobkach, sympatykiem lewicy politycznej.

Badania pozwalają także na charakterystykę "szeregowych" członków związków. Są to raczej mężczyźni niż kobiety, powyżej 35 lat, nie identyfikujący się z polityczną lewicą, częściej pracujący w przemyśle i/lub w sektorze publicznym, raczej wyższych zarobkach. Około 1/3 członków jest zainteresowanych działalnością związków. Młodszy członkowie są bardziej zainteresowani (przy niskim członkostwie).

Pod wieloma względami działacze trzech badanych związków różnią się między sobą, tzn. że wymienione wyżej cechy spotyka się wśród nich z różną intensywnością. Aktywiści i "szeregowi" członkowie różnią się także co do cech świadomości. Ci, którzy są aktywni w związku zawodowym są też częściej aktywni w różnych stowarzyszeniach i ruchach społecznych. Dotyczy to zwłaszcza pracowników komunalnych. Aktywiści są bardziej zdecydowani politycznie

i częściej lewicowi. Aktywiści i związkowcy są nastawieni egalitarnie wobec płac i dążą do pełnego zatrudnienia, podczas gdy członkowie pragną podwyżki płac i ochrony środowiska. Aktywiści przywiązują wagę do działalności związkowej i wierzą w jej skuteczność. W szczególności uważają, iż ruch związkowy służy interesom społecznym i demokratyzacji procesów decyzyjnych. Zróżnicowanie opinii między aktywistami i członkami ma podłoże strukturalne i wiąże się z segmentacją rynku pracy i podziałem pracy według płci. Związki zawodowe winny stawić czoła nowym wyzwaniom ekonomiczno-społecznym wbrew swojej obecnej organizacji i sposobie działania.