

Co-operative National Unions and Federation

CO-OPERATIVES OF EACH CLASS—dairy, packing plant, forestry, etc. — are knit together in national unions. The principle is that co-operatives are supplying the local market, while the National Union is taking care of the surplus.

NATIONAL UNION OF PACKING PLANTS

I am taking the packing plants as an example because I am the most familiar with their operation. These co-operatives generally are rather large, one to each county.

Some of the northern co-operatives receive part of their meat from other districts because of the shortage of cattle and hogs in their areas. This is handled through the union, who also relieves other co-operatives of their surplus meat, and in addition supplies the larger towns and some of the isolated regions in the far north.

The union has built large refrigerators to care for surplus meat which accumulates during the periods

of high production. Some of this meat also is exported.

During certain periods, demand for some cuts is normally much greater than the supply. At Christmas, for instance, most families want a hog's head, the head being cured, smoked and decorated. Thus it forms the center of the Christmas table. There is a saying in Sweden: "Swine breeders ought to foster a hog having a head at each end during the winter and no head at all during the summer." Scientists and breeders, however able they may be, have not yet been successful. But the goal can easily be reached through co-operative refrigerators!

Distribution Problems

Before the war our only problem was with surpluses. Now there is more trouble with shortages.

It is not difficult to work out a distribution plan for the co-operative and union, but it is rather a job to keep the whole thing running. Frequently differences of opinion occur between the manager of the union and the managers of the co-operatives. The latter look only at the success of their own enterprises, whereas the head of the union has to think of the organization as a whole.

In these instances, however, the farmers in the executives of both the union and co-operatives have been able to realize that the smaller units often must be subordinate to the common interest.

In the beginning, the union was concerned only with bulk meat. The co-operatives worked inde-

pendently in the sale of sausage and other processed meats. Then there was a lot of grumbling among the managers of the co-operatives over the union's usurpation of their duties. However, many of the farmers supported the union in its efforts to control the distribution of all meat and meat products.

So it was built up, step by step. A Market Hall was erected at the headquarters in Stockholm one year, at the branch offices another year. The union engaged a chemist and staff for the newly established laboratory, in order to keep ahead of scientific development. They bought a retail firm in Stockholm to get a closer contact with the retail market. But the chief aim of the organization was to act as wholesalers.

The number of farmers joining the co-operatives was steadily increasing, largely owing to the support given by the farmers' union, but also due to the fact that packing plants were able to pay their members a fair price.

National unions of the other classes have been working much in the same way, and it is scarcely necessary to go into details concerning all of them. They are all knit together into the Federation.

THE FEDERATION OF UNIONS

The Federation is about the same to the unions as the unions are to the co-operatives. However, the Federation does not sell or buy any products.

The Federation started many years ago as a general agricultural society devoted to getting statistics and keeping accounts, arranging exhibitions, dealing

with technical subjects and investigations. Most of these duties still remain within the scope of the Federation's activities.

Since the farmers' co-operative movement started on a modern basis, the most important object of the Federation has been to act as the head organization of farmers' co-operatives.

Together with the Farmers' Union the Federation represents all farmers in Sweden during negotiations with the government on prices and similar matters.

Within the Federation appear the same problems as between the individual co-operatives and their union. It is quite natural that the people of the Dairies Union, the Packing Plant Union, etc., should see the problems from their special point of view. Therefore it is up to the Federation to see them from a general, or let us rather say from an agricultural, point of view.

Head of the Federation is Mr. E. Sjögren, a most capable person with contacts everywhere in Swedish industrial life and in the governmental agencies.

Within the Federation there are several departments that deal with different objects of common interest to the co-operatives or to farming as a whole.

The Publicity Department is under Director Bjelle, an extraordinarily able fellow. He started by publishing a cookbook for rural households. Everyone in the Executive laughed at Bjelle and thought the idea stupid and that he was mad. However, he did not give up and managed to publish the book. It sold at a very reasonable price, and the total

number of copies distributed has reached 300,000 (which is an enormous number in this country). The Publicity Department made a large profit, which was used as a starting capital for further publishing of many books and journals. Each week 370,000 copies of "Föreningsbladet" (Federation Weekly) are distributed.

Other Functions

The film business has hitherto not been quite as successful as the publishing; but has made considerable progress during recent years.

A correspondence school was started recently, thanks to profits made through publicity. Perhaps it is a little early to judge, but it looks as if the school is going to be a success too. The Idea School, Sångs-Säby, has already been mentioned, and is run by the Federation and the Farmers' Union together.

A Bookkeeping Department, with branches in different parts of the country, is keeping accounts for about two thousand farmers, but twenty times that number are consulting them. The accounts of the great majority of farmers' co-operatives also are being audited.

Taxation experts and lawyers are employed for the service of the members — rather a useful thing with the extremely complicated taxation system we have in Sweden.

The Statistics and Economic Investigations Department is considered the most important branch within the Federation. It is headed by Director

Stensgård, who is an expert in agricultural economics, a real scientist and quite neutral in his work and conclusions. Sometimes we think he is too neutral and ought to be just a little on our side. However, his complete honesty has proved very useful when it comes to negotiations with the governmental boards. They always believe in his figures.

Many activities fall within the scope of the Federation, but I should like to point out one in particular. Farmers' co-operatives must keep ahead of technical development and scientific research. On the whole it is better for this investigation work to be done by the Federation than by the separate unions, as the results achieved may be applied by more than one of these.

There may also be an opportunity to acquire a factory or enterprise of interest to farming as a whole. Indeed there have been several chances of that kind, but farmers' organizations did not always have enough money. For this purpose there has recently been established an investment fund of thirty million kronor, through contributions from both co-operatives and their national unions. Similar things on a much larger scale, but with different methods, were established many years ago by consumers' co-operatives.

Often, however, I think the Federation goes too much into details. I am not sure, for instance, that it is necessary to centralize the distribution of stationary goods used by the co-ops.

Farmers' Union vs. Federation

I may be blamed for having given too many personal details about my colleagues and friends within the Farmers' Union and Federation — but I have done it for a purpose. I want the reader to realize the true reason for differences and troubles that may appear between Federation and the Farmers' Union. Taken as a whole, the Federation people are educated, trained, clever — but sometimes a little too careful, too official, too distant from the ordinary farmer.

The union people, on the other hand, have contact with the broad group of farmers and feel as the farmers feel — but they sometimes think matters are simpler than they really are, and do not always realize that most problems need a lot of investigation and preparation before they can be solved.

Take for instance a milk strike during 1946. The Farmers' Union threatened to strike before consulting the Federation. It soon became evident that the matter was much more complicated than it first appeared. Federation people were very angry when they realized the situation — and they had reason to be. On the other hand, the Federation would not have done very much at that stage merely by raising claims and sending deputies.

At last both bodies were forced by circumstances to co-operate in government negotiations. We did not get all we wanted but quite a good deal of it. This was partly due to the above-mentioned back-

ground — and partly to the co-operation between union and Federation.

Some years ago the Federation people could not stand the union people, thought themselves much more competent in every respect, and considered they could fix everything themselves without any help from the union.

A journalist friend of mine used to put it like this: "To the Federation, the Farmers' Union is like a dirty crossbred peasant dog, running straight up into a breeding center." This may be an overstatement of the differences between the two bodies at that period, but perhaps the tendency in the saying was right.

The point is that we need both types in a democratic community, the learned and trained people as well as those in close contact with the soil itself and can clearly advance farmers' thoughts and claims.

The relations between the two head organizations of Swedish farming have happily improved very much in the course of time, both of them realizing that they cannot act separately. They may have acute differences like those mentioned, but on the whole they keep in contact with each other, and from now on there are always two representatives from the Federation when the Farmers' Union Executive meets, and vice versa.

A Realistic View

Many of my countrymen may blame me for telling foreign readers about the differences and struggles

within the organizations — but why should I not tell the truth. After all, development means not only planning and action — criticism and struggles (but not wars, I hope) also form part of it. In Sweden we are no angels, but just human beings, with some good qualities and some less good. And I suppose it is very much the same in every country.

There is a habit here, when writing pamphlets and articles, when delivering lectures, etc., in English or other foreign languages, to mention everything about this nation in a flattering way, to idealize anything we have done or are going to do. I do not mind describing things just as they are, including faults and failures. I have been trying to tell the truth as I see it. That gives a more realistic view of our development.

To end this chapter I will relate an episode from a meeting in Stockholm of farmers' organizations of the northern countries. There were a lot of speeches, as is common at such events.

The Finns thanked Swedish farmers for help given to them during both of the Finnish-Russian wars. They continued by saying that they were a little hurt, to start with, that Sweden did not take part in their hard fight against the enemy. Now, they realized that the Swedish government acted much more wisely than their own. It was great luck that Sweden had been able to keep neutral.

The Danes thanked us heartily for all hospitality shown to the great number of Danish refugees during that dark period. Norwegians did the same.

After that all of them talked about the achievements of Swedish farmers' organizations and how impressed they were when seeing the progress of co-operatives and the Farmers' Union. To start with, none of the Swedish participants said anything on this topic, but one could see in their faces how flattered and satisfied they felt.

At last, however, one Swedish gentleman, whom we knew did not talk very frequently, rose and said: "Dear friends and guests, I think we ought to be a little more frank towards each other. From all the speeches delivered in this room during an hour, one could easily get the impression that the Swedes are the most self-devoted and noble people in the world. It is not at all like that. While all of you in Norway, Denmark and Finland have been fighting the enemy and sacrificing every private advantage for the welfare of your nations, we have been sitting here rather quietly, and have had time enough for quarreling, fighting and nicknaming within our own ranks.

"You Norwegians, for instance, why didn't you mention anything about that 'permittent traffic' (German soldiers on leave passing through Sweden by rail) which we were forced by Germany to accept, and which is still an open wound in the relations between our countries?

"As to the progress of our organizations, if there is any, shouldn't we really be able to do something during six years of peace." After that talk, everyone felt easier and there was a better atmosphere in the room.

During the dinner I happened to sit beside the president of the Norwegian Farmers' Union, Arne Rostad. We discussed international affairs and particularly the preparatory I.F.A.P. conference, which was going to take place in London within a few weeks. Swedish farmers were not invited, and I was a little hurt, which I mentioned to Rostad.

"Well," said this gentleman, "you know, Sweden is not a member of the United Nations; you used to be neutral during the war."

I answered; "I didn't know that this was a question about nations or governments. I thought that farmers' organizations all over the world were going to form an international federation in order to take care of their interests."

"You may be right," Rostad replied, "and in due time I am sure this matter will be settled in a satisfactory way. But you Swedish people must realize that there is a little difference between us who have taken part in humanity's most gigantic and disastrous struggle and you who have been neutral. I should like to put it like this: You must be kept in quarantine for some time, then you will certainly be admitted."

I was rather hurt, and Rostad continued. "Don't you remember the talk of that gentleman . . . I didn't catch his name. Between friends we ought to speak quite frankly, say just what we think. Don't you agree with me in that?"

I did, and I admit he was right in putting the matter that way. It gave me the chance of telling him

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about Sweden's position during the war, which was not a very heroic one, but on the other hand may be quite understandable.