

Europe: In the shadows of a desk

The shadow sides of the labor market. About the threats to the good working life and the fight for a fair future in Europe

Saturday 3 February 2024, by [ANDERSEN Nina Trige](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2023).

MY WORK / EU parliamentarian and former trade union leader Marianne Vind has written about the problems on the European labor market in the 21st century. It could have been an important book. It just isn't.

It has been at least 17 years since the social democratic MEP Marianne Vind actually attended [the labor market](#), at least in the way most people are. This can be felt in her review of what the problems on the European – and especially the Danish – labor market are, but above all it can be felt in her identification of the causes of problems and not least in her proposed solutions, which are presented in the new book *The shadow sides of the labor market*.

Marianne Vind is a trained hospital laboratory technician and worked as such from 1995 to 2011. In 2002 she became a union representative, and in 2006 she became chairman of the Danish Laborant Association under the large confederation HK in Denmark. In such a position, you are freed full-time to work for the trade union, which is what most shop stewards at large workplaces are, by the way.

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There is nothing wrong with that as such – the problem lies in the fact that people who are now occasionally employed in the trade unions will most often never manage again in the labor market they are supposed to organize. They stay in the trade union system – alternatively they slip into the livelihood politician track – for a salary that is usually far above that of the trade union members.

Since 2019, Marianne Vind has sat in the European Parliament for the Social Democrats, and in that way continues a long tradition in the Danish trade union movement of pairing a trade union career with a social democratic parliamentary career.

The fact that Marianne Vind has thus for around two decades not been part of the labor market that the rest of us operate in, I would not have hung on as a reviewer if it was not so pervasive for the entire book's analysis of this particular labor market.

Inequality, insecurity and poverty

The introduction is as predictable as a Social Democratic party programme: Win arguments against statutory provisions [minimum wage](#) and for EU regulation of 'globalisation', highlights 'the Danish model' as the most brilliant invention since the wheel, and identifies the free movement of labor and especially the EU's 'Eastern enlargement' as the primary threats to decent working conditions.

Thus, we have been able to strike the tunes to five classics from the 21st century social democratic (employee) songbook well and truly.

Inequality, insecurity and poverty in Europe are driven by three things, writes Vind: The development of technology, bad decisions in the EU (again, it is primarily the eastward enlargement in combination with the free movement of labor that is aimed at), and the weakening of the trade union movement.

The latter in particular could have been interesting, not least considering that Marianne Vind has decades of experience from one of Denmark's largest trade unions. Regrettably, at no point in the book does she reflect on whether the trade union movement itself is partly to blame for the fact that so many today work without collective rights for a wage they cannot live on.

The threat to security and dignity in working life is consistently described as something external, which [trade union movement](#) not have an honest chance to defend against. Insecurity and [poverty](#) are simply 'uninvited guests' in Denmark, as Vind calls it. The rest of the EU envies the Danes for our labor market model, she believes. If only 'the Danish model' and the Danish trade union movement had been allowed to be in peace, everything would have been fine, presumably.

Inequality and insecurity

In the next chapter, Vind reviews a series of data that show that Denmark is extremely high on both unequal pay between women and men, on income inequality in general and on wealth inequality in particular. There has even been a new study since Vind's book went to press, which includes the value of unlisted shares – typically in large family-owned groups, some of which are in Denmark – and that study shows that wealth inequality is much higher than previously assumed.

Instead of reflecting on a possible connection between these conditions and the historically close cooperation between the trade union movement and the employers' organizations, and between the trade union movement and the governing party(ies), Vind states – once again – that the inequality is "driven by currents, which to a large extent have their roots outside Denmark's borders.»

Does Vind really think that there was a time when Denmark was not connected to the rest of the world, and where society was therefore more equal and secure? It is a short circuit of rank to argue that increasing inequality and insecurity in Denmark comes from outside, simply because the same problems also existed (and are growing) in the rest of the world. That the large movement of labor from east to north and west from the mid-2000s inevitably knocked the bottom out of working conditions is a theory that needs to be explained – why the trade union movement was in massive growth, and wages and working conditions for many were significantly improved when the European countries in the 1960s and 1970s initiated an extensive import of labour.

About work?

"This is a book about work", promises Vind at the beginning, but the book is surprisingly little about work [work](#). And the examples from the labor market that Vind uses in the book are often quite out of place.

As an example of how "the rock-solid employment patterns of earlier times" no longer exist, she mentions that the civil service schemes that were widespread in the public labor market in the 20th century have largely been phased out today. As you can read in my book [Paper sniffers, counter paps and form finches](#) if the municipal part of the trade union, Vind is rounded off, it is, however, because

people themselves wanted to be employed on collective agreement terms rather than civil service terms – because it gave better [wage conditions](#) and because there was a ban on strikes for civil servants, which the ILO criticized. In other words, civil service schemes are a really bad example that everything was better in the old days, especially from a trade union perspective.

Claim without empirical basis

I sort of don't disagree with Vind that the labor market is under attack these years, with the resulting increasing inequality and insecurity – including an increase in so-called *working poor* – both in Denmark and in the rest of the EU. In his book, Vind also includes some data that supports this claim.

But that there was a golden age of the welfare state, when 'all wage earners' in Denmark were lifted through 'the Danish model', is on the other hand a claim without empirical basis. At least it depends on what she means by wage earners. There have always been working people who have been run over by employers and by political reforms – and have been thrown under the bus by the trade union movement.

As I also show in the aforementioned book, the implementation of the Danish welfare state's perhaps most famous reform – the Social Reform of 1933 – resulted, for example, in an explosion in the use of temporary workers in municipal administration. Under social-democratic mayors and without significant opposition from their party colleagues at the top of the trade union movement. Only because people on the floor organized themselves – often in direct conflict with their own union leaders – were terms settled after decades of struggle.

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And it is precisely this with organization and concrete professional struggle that Marianne Vind does not present a single example or makes a single reflection. In her universe, the problems must be solved through correct (rather than incorrect) decisions in the Norwegian Parliament and in the EU. Of course with the involvement of the 'partners of the labor market', which means employers' organizations and a trade union movement that has arranged itself in such a way that the management cannot see the realities of their members. Because they lie hidden in the shadows of their own high-lowering desks.

Review written by Nina Trige Andersen

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P.S.

Modern Times

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