Abstract

The starting points for this doctoral thesis are two much discussed issues in Sweden: the consequences of the demographic development with an ageing population and the changes that have taken place in the working life in Sweden as a result of, or in response to, the so called globalisation. The most often suggested solution to the challenge of the growth of an ageing population is that people will have to remain in employment higher up in the ages than at present.

My aim is to understand how the work experiences of ageing blue collar workers have affected how they look on their past and present life as well as their possibilities to continue to
work until the age of 65 or older, and if this is desirable. For this purpose I have interviewed
sixteen elderly blue collar workers at the car manufacturing plant Volvo Torslandaverken in
Gothenburg, some union representatives as well as some white collar workers.

My basic theoretical starting point is historical materialism. I see capital as a constant and
ever present part of the power structure in society and class as a continuous cultural process, a
subjective experience of solidarity and/or conflict. I also analyze the importance of gender and
ethnicity, in the spirit of a long ethnological tradition of studying workers, working life, and
working-class culture.

The empirical chapters, based on the interviews, describe the background and the working
life histories of the workers how these experiences have affected them. It is evident how the blue
collar workers have a permanent feeling of subjugation caused by a number of everyday incidents
in the workplace depending on the power structure in the company. It is also clear that their
influence over their own working life has decreased as they have become older. Nevertheless the
interviewed workers show a high grade of job satisfaction, mostly because of the positive
fellowship among themselves, but also because of their competence in carrying out a
comparatively well paid job, which has made it possible for them to live a good life with self-
esteeem and dignity.

My conclusion is, nevertheless, that a prolonged working life is not seen as desirable by the
workers for three main reasons: health issues brought about through long-term physical labour,
especially as regards the women, less motivation caused by a sense of subordination, diminished
influence and fewer opportunities at work when ageing, and finally the frequent pension scheme
offers by the company. Class related norms based on fairness also have an effect. None of the
interviewed workers want to change their present tasks before retirement and most of them want
to retire at the age of 60 or earlier. My study also shows that the development of the industrial
production at Volvo during the last decade, with more assembly line and lean production, has
impaired the possibilities for elderly workers. There is a risk that increased stress, monotony, and
less influence lead to an increased exclusion of people from the labour market, which leads to a
working life that is not sustainable in the long run.

Keywords: working life, elderly workers, ageing population, working-class culture, industrial
work, Volvo, class identity, retirement age, meaning of work, influence and norms at work.

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