

GOTHENBURG STUDIES IN ECONOMIC HISTORY 12

Ports, dock workers and labour market conflicts

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AKADEMISK AVHANDLING

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Handelshögskolans
fakultetsnämnd vid Göteborgs universitet för vinnande
av filosofie doktorsexamen i ekonomisk historia
framläggs till offentlig granskning
fredagen den 19 december 2014, kl. 10.15
i hörsal Sappören, Sprängkullsgatan 25, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Docent Tapio Bergholm, University of Eastern Finland

Göteborg 2014



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

ABSTRACT

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Gothenburg Studies in Economic History 12 (2014)
ISBN: 978-91-86217-11-2
<http://hdl.handle.net/2077/37421>

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Distribution: Department of Economy and Society (address as above).

This dissertation consists of an introduction and four research papers that connect with two broad research fields: economic growth and labour market conflicts. In the introduction I provide a theoretical framework and I elaborate on the methods and material used in the papers.

In Paper 1, I investigate the topic of inter-industry propensity to strike. Earlier research has suggested that some groups of workers have struck more than others. One such group is dock workers—known within labour history and industrial relations for their militancy across time and space. But as shown in the paper, there is no empirical evidence for the particular strike-proneness of dockers up to WWII. Port strikes seem to have been not so much a quantitative as a qualitative phenomenon: the position of dockers in the distribution chain gave them the potential to disrupt society to a degree far exceeding most other occupational groups.

In Paper 2, co-author Christer Thörnqvist and I study the 1909 Swedish General Strike. The strike was not powerful enough, and the trade unions and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, met a crushing defeat. Our focus is the functioning of the transportation system—and the ports in particular—an aspect of vital outcome for the strike, but one which is underdeveloped in previous research. We make the argument that LO did little or nothing to support the strikers in the ports, and that export could continue with the assistance of strike-breakers. One of the factors explaining LO's disinterest in port affairs was its overall strategy to respect the laws of the state; at the time it was a crime to even try to force someone to strike, or in any way prevent someone from working.

In Paper 3, I examine technology and productivity in the pre-container Port of Gothenburg. I argue that technological change was gradual for a long period of time and that the forklift and pallet—adopted in the late 1940s—were responsible for setting off a series of changes. The productivity figures I present strongly indicate growth up to WWII—an empirical finding that contrasts with results from other ports. In the postwar years productivity continued to grow, but at a faster rate compared to the prewar years. The pattern of productivity offers tentative support for the contention that the impact of the forklift was revolutionary.

In Paper 4, I discuss the transformation of the Swedish labour market in the first half of the twentieth century: from high to low levels of conflict activity. I critically evaluate the power resources hypothesis, saying that the seizing of governmental power by social democrats in the 1930s gave the working class opportunity to shift focus: from costly strikes within the industrial sphere to less costly redistributive policies within the political sphere. As an alternative explanation I emphasize intra-labour tensions. Communism, syndicalism and social democracy showed diverse attitudes towards industrial militancy, and the relative strength of the three ideologies affected conflict activity accordingly.

KEYWORDS: port technology, port productivity, Port of Gothenburg, dock workers, inter-industry propensity to strike, isolated mass hypothesis, strikes and lockouts, disruptive potential, workplace bargaining power, positional power, the 1909 General Strike in Sweden, Swedish labour market conflicts, power resources hypothesis, ideology.