



# Nordic Working Life and Social Dialogue in Times of Crises. Introduction to the Special Issue<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

A crisis refers to some sort of disruption of established practices, routines, or procedures occurring whenever a risk has been realized (Battistelli & Galantino 2019; Beck 1986, 2006). For social actors exposed to crisis in the labor market, this means that they will have to navigate some sort of uncertainty, trying to respond to the consequences unfolding in their surroundings as well as in their own activities (Aven & Renn 2009, p. 1). As they navigate a crisis, they will have to assess further vulnerabilities and damages for their own businesses and the variety of societal values that they adhere to, seeking out opportunities to manage both risks and prospects (Bundy et al. 2017). Doing so nevertheless is difficult and leaves social actors with a variety of tensions that they must address.

Historically, researchers have linked the Nordic labor markets with strong social partners (employers' associations, trade unions, and the state), able and willing to tackle such tensions. Due to high coverage by collective agreements and supportive welfare state arrangements, they have been able both to contribute to institutional stability and support adaption and changes (Alsos & Dølvik 2021; Andersen et al. 2014; Campbell et al. 2006; Kjellberg 2023). In the wake of, for instance, the recent COVID-19 crisis and the ongoing digital transformation of work, research as well as policy and public debates have nevertheless indicated that we may face new types of critical challenges in today's society.

It is important to point out that these challenges display a great variation. For instance, current crises often seem to be global in scale – for example, climate change, digitalization, and the coronavirus pandemic – making it difficult for national-level actors to handle the consequences on their own (Beck 2006). Also, some of the crises seem to have the character of a chock occurring at a specific point in time (e.g., a financial crisis, the pandemic), whereas others have been here for years and will last far into the future (e.g., climate change), although they might change gears on the way and interact with other types of crises (Björck 2016; Enggaard et al. 2023). In addition, the nature of these challenges has to do with the strategic choices of the social partners,

<sup>1</sup> You can find this text and its DOI at <https://tidsskrift.dk/njwls/index>.

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and whether they, as actors in the labor market, perceive the crisis as controllable, and perhaps something that could be exploited to strengthen their position in the Nordic society or not (Boin & 't Hart 2022; Boin et al. 2008). These are all different conditions that play a role for Nordic social partners' ability and willingness to act. We may ask ourselves in what way today's crises and linked developments affect the Nordic labor markets and the Nordic social dialogue. Are the institutional foundations for adaption to various crises still able to provide means and measures to address future challenges in the Nordic countries?

In this special issue, we address these questions, contributing to research on the future of Nordic working life during times of uncertainties by exploring the meaning and the impact of different types of crises and responses. The coronavirus pandemic constitutes a prominent crisis theme throughout this special issue, but the articles also address issues often framed as labor market crises due to digitalization and the emergence of platform work. The articles display a great diversity of both theoretical assumptions and empirical materials. The texts draw on different types of historical, comparative, quantitative, or qualitative data, revealing that the way we approach or conceptualize what we mean by a crisis is not self-evident. The articles are sensitive to the contextual differences, and the fact that involved actors and organizations in the Nordic labor markets face a variety of different risks and have different views of the crises they encounter. Authors of the articles thereby also recognize that most of the actors involved in managing the different crises in the Nordic labor markets differ when it comes to the amount of risk they are willing to take as they strive with different aims (Battistelli & Galantino 2019).

## Contributions

With the above-mentioned differences in mind, the articles in this special issue are divided into two sets of studies: the first set approaches crises as challenges at the institutional/structural level, whereas the second set investigates the consequences of crises closer to the employees' practices at the workplace level. Starting with the first set of studies, emphasis is on how crises affect social dialogue at central and local levels and structural developments of the labor market in the Nordic models. To investigate structural changes, it is crucial to understand the institutional and more general implications of crisis for the labor market regimes in the Nordic countries. This becomes obvious, for instance, in the article 'Nordic Relief Packages and Non-standard Workers: Towards Expanded Universalism and Institutional Inequalities', in which Trine P. Larsen and Anna Ilsøe investigate whether the pandemic has triggered any changes to social protection in the Nordic countries. Through a comparative analysis of government and social partner responses to the crisis in all five Nordic countries, the article finds that the Nordic relief packages were larger and more varied than during previous crises and aimed to create an encompassing safety net. However, the reforms exposed and sometimes reinforced institutionally embedded deficiencies in the Nordic systems around the nexus of standard and non-standard work, leading to potential layers of institutionally embedded inequalities. In sum, the Nordic responses to the pandemic can be characterized as an 'expanded universalism', where targeted measures supplement the 'ordinary' Nordic social protection to cover the most crisis ridden, but not necessarily the poorest, groups.

A similar emphasis on implications for the institutionalized regimes in the Nordic labor markets emerge in the article ‘Trade Union Participation and Influence at Norwegian Workplaces During the Pandemic’, in which Sissel C. Trygstad, Rolf K. Andersen, and Anne Mette Ødegård examine the social partner responses to the coronavirus crisis at company level. The collaboration between social partners at the workplace has previously proven to be particularly effective during crises. This study sheds light on the experiences from trade union representatives (TU reps) during the pandemic in Norway. It analyzes results from a survey aimed at TU reps from the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), which represents just under half of the total unionized employees. According to the TU reps, interaction between the local social partners intensified during the pandemic. Formal participation between the parties stands out to be crucial for enabling this dialogue and can therefore be labeled as the backbone of the Nordic model in times of crisis.

The third and last article in this first set, ‘Hybrid Work Patterns: A Latent Class Analysis of Platform Workers in Denmark’, by Jonas Hulgård Kristiansen, Trine Pernille Larsen, and Anna Ilsøe addresses another crisis facing the Nordic models and its institutions. During the 2010s, platform work arrived in the Nordic labor markets and expanded quickly within industries like transportation and cleaning. This study presents a novel approach for studying differences and similarities among platform workers, by taking into account the wider labor market position of platform workers. Using survey data from a set of additional questions tied to the Danish Labour Force Survey, it applies latent class analysis models to discover patterns of labor market divisions among platform workers in Denmark. Three groups of platform workers are identified, and while all of them have multiple income sources, they have very different labor market positions in the traditional labor market: ‘established workers’, ‘transitional workers’, and ‘new labour market entrants’. These divisions point to marked differences among platform workers, implying that platform work is characterized by varying blends of labor market hybridity in the Nordics.

The second set of articles in this special issue explores workplace-specific implications of crises, where institutions typical to the Nordic setting provide the background conditioning and the social dynamics that are analyzed. This second set of articles comprise studies emphasizing topics like work environment, workplace relations, social interaction, and learning opportunities. These are explorative studies providing results that cannot be generalized without reservation for different types of crises and businesses. Nevertheless, the studies all indicate the importance of understanding the dynamics of workplace relationships, if we are to grasp the implications that a crisis may have for psychosocial work environment, social interaction, and learning opportunities in the Nordics. For instance, in the article ‘Working from Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Workplace Relationships’, Malin Espersson, Alina Lidén, and Ulrika Westrup investigate what employees do to maintain their workplace relationships when working from home. Based on semi-structured interviews with Swedish knowledge workers, they identify how this is done by (1) being selective in regard to social interactions, (2) being compliant or resistant during digital meetings, and (3) having less spontaneity and creativity when in the digital space.

In the article ‘Short-time Work, Redundancies, and Changing Work Environment: The Hospitality Sector During COVID-19’, Alexis Rydell and Elin Storman continue investigating the consequences of the coronavirus crisis at a workplace level by examining



how short-time work (STW) schemes and redundancies affected the psychosocial work environment within the hospitality sector during the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Based on 36 interviews with employees and managers from three hotels in Sweden, the results show that during the rather long period of government restrictions, radical shifts in hotel occupancy rates, and implemented STW schemes, the work environment changed in terms of employees' perceptions of job (in)security; workload and work extension; time and financial structures; and workplace relations.

By addressing the critical consequences for professional drivers' work and learning opportunities due to digitalization, Tuomo Alasoini, Arja Ala-Laurinaho, and Marja Känsälä eventually explore the link between the ongoing automation of vehicles and the potential crises in future employment. Their article 'Driving High and Low: Heavy Vehicle Drivers and Their Supervisors Facing Digitalization' concludes that digitalization thus far has led to automation of individual vehicle functions, speeded up the communication among the drivers and between them and their supervisors, as well as facilitating control of work performance. Rather than substituting labor, they also identify how automation fosters a widening digital divide between drivers and supervisors, leaving drivers as bystanders in learning processes associated with digitalization.

In conclusion, this special issue allows the reader to engage with a multitude of perspectives on crises in Nordic labor markets (Aven & Renn 2009, p. 1). A first set of articles are presented, enabling us to deepen our understanding of how Nordic actors and historically strong social partners navigate and act in crises, by assessing vulnerabilities and seeking out opportunities to manage both risks and prospects at work (Bundy et al. 2017). However, this special issue also allows us to move closer to the workplace and gain knowledge about the social dynamics that each and every one of us experience as the consequences of a crisis materialize in our daily work. As a final commentary, following these two sets of articles, we eventually also add some reflections by Anna Ilsøe and Pelle Korsbæk Sørensen, on how a crisis like the recent pandemic affects the way we conduct research. Their commentary ends this special issue by describing how researchers become exposed to a sense of urgency, fostering an interdisciplinary fast-track sociology with implications for methods, theory, analysis, and societal impact.

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