

”The strategy for equal pay for nurses in Denmark”

Historical background

- The Danish Nurses’ Organization and the Danish nurses have had a long struggle to obtain equal pay.
- In order to understand the continuous effort that the nurses have put into the fight for fair conditions of pay, you will have to look back in time.
- One could point at several stages in history, but the Governments Public Servant Commission which was to grade the State employees on a new wage scale in 1969, is a landmark in the long wage struggle.
- DNO was working hard to make the Commission reconsider the nurses’ wages, and attempts were made to make it clear that the nurses’ wages by no means could match their responsibility and qualifications. Especially not when comparing with other professionals’ wages with the same level of education but dominated by men.
- At the time being, the DNO did not succeed in changing the level of wages. The existing hierarchy of wages was maintained and since then we have had to live with the conditions of wages which were stipulated in 1969.

- In the coming decades nurses had several battles for a better pay. Through the 1990’s and in the beginning of the new millennium nurses have often rejected a collective agreement settlement which frequently have led to strikes.
- In the period up to the collective bargaining in 2008 the discussion on equal pay got a central position. Denmark was in the midst of an economic boom, and we could see that wages in the private sector rose rapidly.
- At the same time part of our education strategy had worked successfully. We had succeeded in lifting the level and the quality of the major welfare educations – for instance social educationalist and nurses – during the first years of the new millennium. In 2001 the education as a nurse became a professional bachelor education.
- Part of the goal in lifting the level of education was to make the wages rise as well. After several intensive negotiations with the employers we had to realize that their scheme of things was quite different from ours.
- The strategy of using a higher education level as a tool for better wages has not worked sufficiently for nurses in Denmark. Our academic nurses, though, are an exception from this. We have succeeded in negotiating a level of wages for them which is identical to the one that other academics have in the public labour market.

- The 2008 collective bargaining resulted in a 60 days long strike. Along with nurses, many other organizations dominated by women, were on strike.
- The strike ended in a negotiated agreement which gave the nurses 0,5 percent more than the rest of the public labour market.

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- In 2008 we were excited about the result, but basically it is very difficult for the trade unions in the public sector to handle such unequal distribution of the money. It results in gap digging and challenges the solidarity within the trade unions, and we need each other to stand united in many other contexts.

Wages Commission

- Apart from improvement of wages we also succeeded in setting up a Wages Commission to investigate wage and working conditions of public employees. The Danish Nurses' Organization had been pushing hard in order to set up a commission. Our role model was the Norwegian Wages Commission who had submitted their statement in February 2008 including a recommendation that the Norwegian Parliament – Stortinget - should deposit a special reserve of 30 billion Krona for the low-paid groups of women in the public sector. Eli will enlighten you on what has happened since, when she takes the floor.
- Unfortunately, the Danish Wages Commission did not come up with any clear recommendations of that kind.
- Nevertheless, their statement showed clearly that groups with a medium-cycle higher education – for instance nurses – have a poor return of their education. Especially social educationalists and nurses – two professions widely dominated by women – had low wages compared to other groups.
- Even though the Wages Commission had several clear conclusions on the gender-divided labour market and the lack of equal pay, the Commission was composed of the unions and the employers' organizations, and the employers did not want to acknowledge that we have unequal wages in Denmark. It was very clear that they did not want to take responsibility for the unequal wages.

The Agreement model and Equal pay

- The agreement model in the public sector in Denmark cannot be used to create equal pay. There are several reasons for this, but the main obstacle is the fact that we are given an economic frame up front at the beginning of any collective bargaining, and that frame is very difficult to do anything about. If we want more for the nurses, some other professionals will get less.
- I think it is crucial to have an agreement model which states that the unions and the employers' organizations in common agree on wages and conditions, and I am preoccupied with having a strong solidarity within the trade unions in order to put a united pressure on the employers as regards good working conditions. But when it comes to equality and equal pay, our public agreement model is not the best tool in the toolbox.

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- Our lesson learned after decades of struggle for better wages is:
 - Firstly: The public system of agreement has its clear restrictions when it comes to conflict in order to obtain improvements. The public employers save money when there is a conflict going on. Furthermore, the public employers have a special power, because they are also the ones who make the laws. They have the special privilege to close a conflict with a legislative act – without having to give in on any matters or making compromises. This is a significant difference compared to how the agreement model works in the private labour market.
 - Secondly: Equal pay cannot be obtained via the agreement system. There is no room within the system for some groups to gain a bigger part of the cake than others. It creates too much uneasiness in the trade unions, splitting the cooperation.
 - Thirdly: The unequal pay in Denmark has its roots in a historic and structural understanding of men and women's work which can only be changed by major political discussions about the way of looking at the value of men and women's work.

Current Equal Pay Strategy

- In DNO we have reconsidered our strategy in the way that it no longer is about solving the equal pay problem at the negotiation table but instead about getting the politicians to take responsibility and put an end to unequal pay.
- At the collective bargaining earlier this year we worked in two tracks.
 - One track that focused on getting the other trade unions to acknowledge and support the female dominated professional groups' demand for equal pay by reserving equal-pay-pool.
 - We made no demands that the equal-pay-pool should be expressed in large sums of money because that would require a major imbalance, and we were aware that it would be difficult for other trade unions to explain to their members why they should pay for a pay rise to other professionals. That is why our demand regarding the size of the equal-pay-pool was more or less symbolic. The pot ended up paying around 600 Danish Krona a year to the female dominated groups in the public sector. A very small but nevertheless important pay rise.
 - Our second track was about sending a clear appeal to the elected representatives that it is their responsibility to do something about unequal pay in Denmark. We used the results of track one to tell the politicians that a joined trade union movement wanted them to do something about equal pay.
- There was no political solution to the equal pay issue in 2018, though.

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- But we have received a symbolic helping hand that we will make use of when we reopen our lobbying towards the elected representatives and try to convince them that it is their responsibility to create equal pay.
- We have realized that the agreement model at the public labour market cannot solve the equal pay issue of the nurses. There is simply a limit to what we can accomplish within the system when pay rises of some groups will have to be at the expense of others'.
- Furthermore, the equal pay issue is complicated, historic and substantial which means that it is a political task to do something about the unequal pay.

End

- When reading the background material and listening to the speakers so far, I am bound to say that the challenges regarding equal pay are alike in the Nordic countries. Therefore, I would like to suggest that we strengthen our cooperation regarding equal pay and work together in order to place this issue at the top of the political agenda in all of our countries and make it stay there until a solution is found and work within the female dominated professions is as highly valued as the one in male dominated professions.