

TRADE UNIONS FIGHTING FOR DECENT WORK IN THE WINE INDUSTRY

Sweden's largest trade union – Unionen – is an active partner in the Global Deal and has been since the outset. The president of Unionen, Martin Linder, has stated that if companies are serious about their sustainability work, they should support the Global Deal.

One example of Unionen's engagement is in the wine industry in South Africa, where working conditions in several places do not live up to the requirements of 'decent work'. Magnus Kjellsson, Head of International Affairs at Unionen, believes that the trade union's work "goes right to the heart of the Global Deal."



Wineyard workers in South Africa.

"I am convinced that entrepreneurship goes hand in hand with social responsibility and I really do believe that this can lead to a win-win situation for the wine industry. Social dialogue is not a yoke; it's an enabler meaning that we will avoid a lot of problems in the future," he says.

This engagement in the wine industry began when Swedish television broadcast a programme in autumn 2016 on irregularities at Robertson Winery in South Africa. In Sweden, all alcoholic drinks are sold via Systembolaget – the Swedish Alcohol Retailing Monopoly – where the majority of staff are members of Unionen. Unionen approached Systembolaget with a proposal to do something to improve the situation for people working in the company's supply chain.

This led to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Systembolaget, Unionen and the international union federation IUF. The parties agreed to exchange information on working conditions in the industry. Reported incidents will be investigated by Systembolaget.

“What made the memorandum possible was that our local elected representatives have raised these issues with the board and at other levels within Systembolaget. This is a new way for us to work and we don't quite know how it will pan out. But we hope to be able to make a difference and ensure trade union rights and better working conditions in the wine industry.”

says Magnus Kjellsson, Head of International Affairs at Unionen.

One of the people who will ensure the MoU is used is Mopholosi Mokorong at IUF's regional office in Johannesburg. He says that IUF are now considering starting a training programme for trade unions to develop strategies to investigate compliance with the MoU.

"I don't think that this agreement will completely eradicate the problems, but it can reduce the hardships. It can also be the starting point to realise freedom of association and promote collective bargaining processes in the sector. I think it is a tool that we can use to change attitudes to these issues," he says.

According to IUF there are major challenges to be addressed. The situation for employees in the wine industry leaves a lot to be desired. Wages are low, normally between ZAR 2 600 and ZAR 3 800 (around SEK 1 850– 2 700) a month. For seasonal farmworkers, wages are even lower, and there are no negotiations whatsoever," says Mopholosi Mokorong.



Mopholosi Mokorong, working on IUF's regional office in Johannesburg.

He also talks of poor working conditions, inadequate protective equipment and widespread 'union-busting' campaigns, etc.

We move on to the Western Cape province to visit vineyards and meet local trade unions. In Stellenbosch we also meet Linda Lipparoni who is Chief Executive of the Wine and Agricultural Ethical Trade Association (Wieta) – an organisation that works for social and agricultural sustainability and which around half of the province's wine producers are members of.

She gives an impression of the challenge that awaits. "The wine industry is made up of a lot of small enterprises and vineyards, often family-owned. The trade unions are small and they experience internal competition. The business is strongly seasonal and a large proportion of the workforce come to work on temporary contracts during the harvest.

Wieta tries to promote good relations between the social partners and offers courses to increase awareness, but the needs are enormous.

says Linda Lipparoni.

"The ability to manage conflicts and resolve problems to get positive results is not there. For example, everyone has had training on how to use PPE (personal protection equipment). But particularly in the smaller farms they have not trained the supervisors to remind the workers and made sure that the safe working procedures are being followed. The workers are often not English- or Afrikaans-speaking and often they have not understood the instructions."

At the same time, Linda Lipparoni stresses that ethical working conditions are a strategic part of the ongoing transformation of the industry. The trade unions play an important role in this respect, not least when it comes to investigating working conditions. Wieta carries out its own investigations, but it is not out in the vineyards on a daily basis.

“The biggest challenge that we are seeing is that we need to promote relations between workers and producers, in other words promote communication. But the trade unions often don’t have the resources or the necessary organisational skills to be able to speak to management on an equal footing about the issues”, says Linda Lipparoni.

During autumn 2017, representatives of both Unionen and Systembolaget travelled to South Africa to get a clearer picture of the situation. Following the visit, Systembolaget also decided to become a Global Deal partner.

Hanna Sutherlin, who is responsible for sustainability matters at Systembolaget, sees a clear link between the Global Deal and cooperation with Unionen/IUF:

“The most important thing for us with the MoU is to increase the reporting of incidents. If there are problems, we want to hear about them and do something about them. What makes the MoU interesting is that it builds on dialogue between the social partners.”

What problems do you want to solve?

“Trade union activities for example. If the union experiences problems with accessibility or organisation, we need to be informed. Or if someone considers that our suppliers don’t live up to our code of conduct in other ways.



Hanna Sutherlin, Sustainability Manager at Systembolaget.

Our suppliers must comply with it even if they are right at the bottom of the chain. Perhaps there of all places, because that is where there is the greatest risk and where workers are most vulnerable.”

South Africa is the fourth most popular wine-producing country at Systembolaget. But the MoU applies in all countries. Suppliers that do not comply with the code of conduct risk Systembolaget ending cooperation with them.

“But we preferably want to improve conditions for staff so that we can continue working with them. Nothing will improve in South Africa if we stop trading with them,” says Hanna Sutherlin.

BACKGROUND FACTS

- In August 2017, a Memorandum of Understanding was agreed between Systembolaget in Sweden and the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF), together with the Swedish trade union Unionen. The parties have a common interest in improving the working conditions in the alcohol industry. Both Systembolaget and Unionen are partners to the Global Deal.
- Systembolaget is a state-owned company with a monopoly on the sale of alcoholic drinks in Sweden.
- Unionen is Sweden’s largest trade union, with some 640 000 members.
- IUF is the global trade union federation representing workers throughout the food chain.

TWO TRADE UNION VOICES ON THE MOU



Abraham Daniels, research and policy coordinator
FAWU (FOOD AND ALLIED WORKERS UNION):

"I am very pleased, this is one of the best MoUs I have seen. It gives hope to workers in South Africa, because it's clearly defined in terms of struggles that workers have with working conditions, and also in terms of getting better access to profit-sharing. We will as a union participate to see that the cellars and producers respect workers' rights. I also hope that Systembolaget and IUF will be more active to bring this message across when they meet the producers, because they don't listen to us and sometimes they disrespect us."

What change do you expect for your members?

"I would like to see that the unions get better access to the farms and that grievances from workers are addressed."

"We are mainly organising in the wine industry because of one specific reason. That is the exploitation taking place behind the mountains and covered by the beautiful vineyards. You can see pictures of happy white people drinking wine, but you don't see pictures of happy farmworkers."

He reads the MoU for the first time and continues:

"It's a good policy. Investigating and reporting is good, but then what is going to happen? What are the sanctions?"

Ramahlele is informed that there could be a sales stop or in the worst case a termination of the contract.

"So Systembolaget can touch those big bosses? That's exactly what we are looking for. It means more allies so we don't have to send all our troops in and can focus on something else."



Bortumelo Ramahlele, occupational health and safety
official, CSAAWU (Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural
and Allied Workers Union):