

# The Norwegian Workers' Education Association: A Midwife of Labor's Breakthrough in Norway

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## *Political and Social Background*

*Norway around 1900* Norway in the year 1900 would be more easily recognizable to a person from the global South than to a citizen of present-day Norway. One of Europe's smallest countries, with a population of 2.2 million, it was also one of the poorest. Still a predominantly agrarian country, it suffered from the side effects of early industrialization that other European countries had known for decades. Under pressure from a growing labor movement and an increasingly restive citizenry, the Liberal Party was spearheading reformist social policies and further democratization in Norway, whereas the Conservative Party resisted such reforms. A third party—the Norwegian Labour party—was founded by some local trade unions in 1887, but remained a marginal influence at the turn of the century even if the party won sixteen percent of the votes cast in the election of 1900. However, it was about to begin its meteoric rise from obscurity to political dominance. In 1899 a number of trade unions came together to found a national superstructure—the LO—with 1,500 registered members. This prompted employers to do the same. The Employers' Association dates back to the year 1900. Next, the right to vote was extended to new groups of voters. Before 1898 only men with an income above a certain minimum could participate in elections, but universal suffrage for men was introduced in 1898. Women were then given the right to vote in local elections in 1910 and in parliamentary elections in 1913. These reforms were introduced by the Liberal Party.

*Major Developments 1900–1940* The three decades that followed were a period of rapid growth of the labor movement, frequent and often bitter labor disputes, persistent but uneven economic growth, and significant structural changes in the economy. The union with Sweden was peacefully dissolved in 1905. Norway steered clear of the Great War that devastated large swaths of Europe from 1914 to 1918. The 1920s were marked by several pronounced downturns in the economy, furnishing the background of social and political conflicts on a scale hitherto unknown in modern Norway.

The political landscape underwent radical changes between 1900 and 1930. The Labour Party for the first time became the most popular party at the election in 1919 with 31.6 percent of the votes. It then went through a period of internal turmoil, a short flirtation with the Communist International, party splits,

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and subsequent weakening at the polls until it reemerged as by far the most popular party in the 1927 elections. Although not in government until 1935, Labour's rise had an impact on the Liberal Party that introduced a number of social reforms around World War One.

LO membership also grew rapidly during the first two decades of the century. In 1919, membership figures reached 144,000 and then stagnated during the 1920s, a decade characterized by bitter labor disputes and politically charged bickerings within the unions themselves. The decade following the end of the Great War was a time of the fight against wage reductions marked by strikes—some lasting for years—lockouts, conflicts with scabs, and disputes over the right to take secondary action.

The 1930s saw a settlement and a lasting compromise being struck between capital and labor. The world crisis delivered the same devastating blow to Norwegian workers as it did all over Europe. The Labour Party won a decisive victory in the elections in 1933 with a pragmatic program focusing on job creation and social reforms. Government initiative was called for to act as an economic driver when private investors did not invest sufficiently. Demand was also put on the government to contribute to the redistribution of wealth and stand as a guarantor of social security. This became the political platform of the new labor government from 1935 to 1940. At the same time the LO and the Employers' Association agreed upon a new framework of handling relations between the two sides of industry called "The Basic Agreement" in which the Employers' Association accepted that workers in associated companies were granted all basic union rights, whereas the LO for its part conceded that employers should retain the management prerogative and promised to honor industrial peace during the term of a collective agreement. LO membership shot up during those years and reached 306,000 in 1940, the year Norway was occupied by Nazi Germany.

### *Labor Education*

*Early Initiatives* The newly created workers' organizations felt an urgent need to enhance the skills of their elected officers. This was the main driver of the early attempts to establish workers' educational institutions. The demand was great for people who could lead organizations according to democratic principles, who knew the ideological ideas of these organisations, and who could communicate this ideological platform. Local branches of the unions and the Labour Party randomly organized short training sessions—more often than not focusing on the skills of public speaking.

The first step toward establishing a more professional and systematic training was taken in 1909 when The Social Democratic Evening School was founded in Oslo. The initiators wanted the main focus to be upon agitation, but after discussions in the local unions, the school's mission statement was made much broader, namely "to enable party members to hold office." Students would be taught three evenings per week over a period of two years. The curriculum

included Norwegian, English, accounting, economics, social laws, and political history. Every student would pay a small amount per month. A majority of those who enrolled came from the unions. In the first ten years of its existence, 634 students were enrolled, but only a minority of them registered for the final exam. In addition the school was responsible for a number of short courses for chairpersons, secretaries, and treasurers. The number of students was not impressive, but a high percentage became elected officers in the labor movement.

The school's activities were sharply reduced in the early 1920s in the wake of the party splits that occurred after the break with the communist movement but picked up after the merger of Labour and the Social Democratic Parties. The Social Democratic Evening School was clearly a precursor of the AOF.

A second initiative of great relevance in our context was taken in 1920 when another educational institution was started right outside of Oslo. The founders signalled its ideological platform by incorporating the word "socialist" in its name. This was in fact a boarding school where the students were taught during ordinary working hours over a period of three months. This was also reflected in its name: The Socialist Daytime School. Fifteen courses spanning three months each were arranged between 1920 and 1940 with a combined number of nearly five hundred students. Several of the most prominent leaders in Norwegian politics after 1945 were given a thorough introduction to the history, principles, and aims of the labor movement in these courses, or they themselves gave lectures.

The LO and the Labour Party also created a Central Committee for Socialist Education that coordinated efforts to establish similar institutions in other parts of the country. For three months, evening courses were organized in a number of local communities. Even a Workers' Correspondence School that offered courses on political and trade union topics was set up. According to the report to the LO Congress in 1930, these schools at that time had more than one thousand students. It is worth observing that many prominent labor leaders involved themselves in this work both as board members and as lecturers. Among the participants, reams of names are recognized that became important figures in the labor movement or in public offices decades later: union officials, MPs, newspaper editors, a couple of prime ministers, the first general-secretary of the UN.

*Establishment of the AOF* Toward the end of the 1920s it was widely recognized that there was too little educational activity in the labor movement. Activities were incidental and relied too much on the whims and capabilities of local activists. This was a period of rapid growth in membership with a concomitant growth in the need of well-trained elected officers. The LO Congress in 1931 decided to establish the AOF with the LO and its national unions, the Labour Party and the Labour Youth League, as collective members. The Norwegian Cooperative Association was invited to join but declined the invitation. The Communist party and other leftist organisations were not invited. In this respect, the AOF followed in the footsteps of the AOF-Denmark (founded in 1924) and differed from the Swedish ABF (founded 1912). This

gave the necessary backing to the AOF to fully identify with the wishes of the Labour Party. In the 1930s the organization was perceived by friends and political foes alike to be the educational organization of the Labour Party as well as the unions. AOF's leaders and elected officers shared this view. The AOF was an instrument whose task was to fight for and contribute to the strengthening of both wings of the labor movement—the unions and the party. The Communists—a small but well-organized and committed group—were left out. A small part of the membership dues paid by each member of the unions and the party was set aside to finance the new organization. The start-up was delayed by six months. The Great Depression triggered by the Wall Street collapse had also hit Norway. Downsizing and bankruptcies left about one-third of LO members unemployed by the summer of 1931. In addition, 60,000 workers were locked out for 24 weeks and 26,000 went on sympathy strike. The unions, of course, had to devote their energy and meager resources above all to the precarious situation in the labor market.

Nevertheless, the AOF was able to start up its work on January 1, 1932. Initially, there was only one person on the payroll, but a second was added to the staff just a few months later. Three more were added over the next two years. With such a small staff, the organization had to rely on volunteers to a very large extent. We will take a closer look at the factors that can explain the rapid expansion of activities during the eight years the AOF was allowed to exist before the Nazi invasion of Norway. AOF's remarkably quick expansion after its foundation was partly due to the obvious need for better training of elected officers in steadily growing member organizations as well as the general need for better basic education of workers. But this is not the whole story. In order to grasp the essence of the AOF in the 1930s it is of paramount importance to understand that the organization was totally integrated in organized labor. Furthermore, one must understand the prevailing working-class culture at the time. Before going into detail, it is necessary to place the organization in its context.

### *The AOF in Context*

*Purpose* The rather lofty formulations of the original bylaws of the new organization stated that “the AOF aims to function as an instrument in the workers' socialist class struggle and contribute to the economic and political education of the Norwegian working class and to the enhancement of the spiritual and cultural level of the said class.”

The founders placed the organization in the political context of an ongoing “socialist class struggle” and emphasized its role as an instrument in that struggle. AOF's task was to serve, not to lead. It was conceived as a labor support organization that was to educate and to raise consciousness. As such, it was one out of many specialized organizations set up by labor in those years that served to strengthen the coherence of the movement.

There is no proof of a perceived dilemma between the vision of a fundamentally different society and the pragmatic development of the policies of the Labour Party as well as the LO in seeking compromises with the conservative powerbrokers in both politics and working life. The AOF soon poured out films, plays, and written study materials that aimed to strengthen class consciousness. At the same time, the LO was involved in discussions with the employers that led to the signing of the Basic Agreement, and the Labour Party was quietly preparing to take over the reins of government despite of the bourgeois majority in Parliament. One reason why this apparent contradiction never came up for broad debate in the organizations is probably the assumption that a more militant and self-conscious working class would secure a better compromise than docile workers. Another may be the conviction among leading cadres that a layer of militant working-class opinion leaders constituted a bulwark against the threat of fascist ideas surging in Norway as in other European countries.

*The AOF and the Labour Movement* The first board elected in 1931 consisted of two representatives from the LO, two from the Labour Party and one from the Labour Youth League. One of the two representatives of the party was the party chair. The second one was a former and also a future general-secretary of the party. Both men were to serve as prime ministers of Norway after the war. The representatives of the LO and the Youth League were likewise top leaders of their respective organizations. The General Council, which was a much larger body with twenty-two members, included, among others, the LO president and the presidents of several key national unions. This top-heavy representation in AOF's decision-making bodies continued throughout the decade.

The composition of the board served as a signal to elected officers and ordinary members alike that the AOF was to be taken seriously. The status of the board members opened doors for the small AOF staff and helped them build an impressive network of contacts that furnished voluntary assistance in the production of study materials and the organization of AOF activities at the grassroots. A number of prominent experts on economics and social affairs wrote pamphlets and study guides on their specialties. This network also secured access for the AOF's general secretary, Haakon Lie, to the inner circles of the Labour Party and the LO. He was thus secured a platform for influencing important decisions on educational matters as well as intimate knowledge of the leaders' thinking. The leaders, for their part, secured a loyal organization that listened to the signals they sent out and worked to support their decisions.

*Working Class Culture* There were different value systems among workers. Some were communists, some were deeply religious. To some the world outside their family and their local community did not matter, to others the plight of the downtrodden in the next valley spurred them into action. By the 1930s the idea of solidarity was known, felt, and practiced to such an extent that it is widely accepted to be a main characteristic of the working class at that time and one that set it apart from other classes in society. This does not

mean that many people could analyze the concept in abstract terms. It was more like a norm that did not need to be spelled out because this was simply felt to be the right way to act. Combined with a very strong class consciousness, the idea of solidarity became a decisive weapon for organized labor.

The key idea of solidarity is collective action among people with equal rights. Standing together makes you stronger than if you fight on your own. The freedom to exploit others is curtailed, but the range of options available to those who are exploited is expanded. Solidarity is a weapon for the underprivileged. It contains an element of struggle and fight against the oppressors and demands that each individual submits to collective decisions out of their own free will and from a feeling of personal gain in the long run. "Today I support you, no matter what. Tomorrow you will support me if I need your support." Hence, loyalty to the union is paramount, but only if decisions are made in a democratic way. One learns to live with defeats without breaking out of the collective of which one is a part. This is an alternative to individualism and broader than familism where solidarity, obviously, does not reach beyond the family or the clan and, furthermore, is built on a hierarchical way of thinking to a much larger extent than in the union movement. Nor must solidarity be confused with charity, which does not contain the idea of collective action and relies on the whim of the donor, not on the duty to support people with equal rights who are presently in need of support.

*AOF Cultural Activities and Influence* The AOF caught the predominant strains of this culture; sublimated them through the use of films, plays, study circles, lectures, and songs; and propagated these, perhaps vaguely understood but widely shared, ideas among workers. Thousands and thousands of workers recognized many of their own thoughts in what they saw, heard, and learned and identified themselves with the message. As a consequence, they became conscious not only of their own identity as belonging to a specific class, but were also given confidence that as a united body this class could achieve a range of desirable objectives.

Perhaps inadvertently, this strong emphasis on workers as a productive class—if only they could be given jobs—made contributions from other classes more or less invisible. This was manifested in a deep-seated scepticism toward academics in many quarters although the labor movement made quite extensive use of academics as advisors, authors of study materials, and lecturers. It is also striking to a modern observer that "the worker" in the 1930s to an overwhelming degree was a man. Women were often—but not always—invisible. The worldview transmitted by the AOF can be defended by pointing at the necessity to strengthen class consciousness, to highlight social inequities, and to prevent workers from being taken in by fascism or communism.

In short, the AOF propagated the ideological basis of organized labor and at the same time taught practical skills that were essential to leaders of trade unions and other democratic organizations.

Cultural activities and propaganda made AOF known to the general public—and feared, even detested, but also respected by its political opponents. Films were produced, amateur theater groups were trained, labor songs were translated from German or Russian, and new songs were composed and disseminated by the AOF. Many of them are still being sung on important occasions like May Day and union congresses. These cultural activities went a long way toward building coherence in a working-class population that was split in more ways than one, nurturing a sense of pride and confidence in their own class, and pointing out “the others” as a common enemy. These activities were not only for educational purposes or entertainment. They also served as outright propaganda after the patterns consummated by the Soviet and Nazi regimes but were used for a quite different political purpose. The texts eulogize work, the contribution of the working class, belief in a better future, and the idea of solidarity.

*International Perspective* Despite the everyday hardships that working men and women experienced in these bleak years of economic crises, the AOF was never allowed to relinquish an international perspective in its activities. In Europe in the 1930s this meant, above all, to alert ordinary people to the threat of rapidly rising fascism. Haakon Lie traveled to Spain during the civil war as a guest of the Republicans. His impressions were duly reported in newspapers and meetings in Norway. When he reported from Spain at a public meeting in the main union building in Oslo, the hall was chock-full with 1,200 people two hours before he spoke. In addition several thousand were listening in the square outside. A similar visit to Moscow was also reported but served only to give him a life-lasting dislike of what he observed.

It is an interesting detail that a young German refugee was a frequent speaker at meetings touching on the situation in Nazi Germany. His name was Herbert Frahm, better known as Willy Brandt, the future chancellor of West Germany. The emphasis on international problems was in fact so strong that a number of speakers at May Day celebrations complained about what to them appeared to be an overemphasis on international questions in the speaking notes sent them from the AOF.

### *Conclusion*

*Impact* We cannot measure exactly the impact of the AOF in the 1930s because the organization was integrated with all the other noncommunist labour organizations to such an extent that it is often difficult to distinguish one from the other. Decisions were not made in private meetings of decision-making bodies and then handed down to the AOF without prior knowledge. There was a huge amount of informal discussions, personal contacts on a nearly daily basis, and overlapping representation. The Labour Party and the LO had two slightly different perspectives—one focusing on trade union interests, the other fighting for political power, but these two perspectives were not

seen to conflict but to supplement each other. The AOF was probably better known by the general public for its support of the party than for teaching the nuts and bolts of trade unionism, but the annual reports indicate that the latter took up as much of the organization's resources as the former. There must have been discussions about where to put the emphasis but such discussions are not reflected in the sources left behind. It does not seem to have been difficult to serve two masters.

The AOF also escaped unscathed from quarrels over strategies and political issues that are bound to arise in any social movement. It was not an organization that took a stand in day-to-day political battles. Its task was to serve and to educate. In the sources left behind there is no trace of political differences or of personal animosities that one would expect to find in most organizations. From what we know, the feeling they shared of working together toward a common aim, supplemented by the adrenaline kick of winning more and more adherents served to dampen conflicts. Haakon Lie, who was later feared by many for his temper and intolerance toward people of deviant opinions, remarked in an interview in 2005 that the time he spent in the AOF was the happiest time of his life.

The impact should be assessed at three different levels: individual participants, the labor movement, and the general population. The total number of participants at the Evening School, in short courses, and in study circles amounted to roughly 135,000 for the period of 1932 to 1938. Based on rough-and-ready estimates, we can guess that one out of six union or party members participated in at least one course organized by the AOF, which gave them a better understanding of how democratic organizations work and the ideas of the labor movement. The importance of these courses should not be underestimated. The local branches of the labor movement gave young people their very first chance to hold an office, however insignificant it may appear. It is easy to underestimate how this show of trust can boost the self-confidence of those who are humble and feel rejected by society at large.

As for the organization's impact on the labor movement, upon joining the movement, thousands of young people became, thanks to the AOF, part of a community where they felt accepted and that gave them a feeling of belonging to something bigger than their own, often uninspiring, life. The movement gave very many unemployed workers hope of a better future. The AOF eased people's introduction into this community. Moreover, if one takes a closer look at what ideas were conveyed in films, brochures, plays, and posters put out by the AOF in those years, it is easy to ascertain that the building of class consciousness and solidarity were the overarching aims.

The use of films, plays, and songs also gave the Labour Party an advantage over the other parties in the election campaigns in 1933 and 1936. At that time, these were modern and inventive features of propaganda that utilized to any significant extent in Norway only by the labor movement. Of course, the AOF did not win the elections. But it made important contributions to the Labour party's campaign.



Finally, at the national level the AOF's efforts cemented the idea of the welfare state in the population. The first steps in this direction were taken by the Liberal party before the First World War, at least partly in order to stem the surge of the labor movement, but the broad sweep of legislation that emphasized the right of all citizens to basic support by the government was initiated by the Labour Party in the second half of the 1930s. This was a logical follow-up of the ideas propagated by labor.

Secondly, the idea of democracy was at the heart of AOF activities. One should bear in mind that fascism was a very real threat also in Norway at this time and, although the labor movement had just broken with the Soviets, there was still a fair number of Communists among the members of the trade unions. Many of them were excellent union officers, but their political views never came close to being supported by a majority in the unions. Among the reasons for this, one must surely count the fact that they were challenged on their view of democracy.

*Legacy* After the war, political tensions eased. Propaganda activities were dropped. The general educational level rapidly improved, and the revolution in communications gained speed. The AOF turned into a general adult education organization but held on to trade union education as an important part of activities. Government funding and participants' fees became key sources of income, in addition to what the unions paid for their members. The organization continued to grow until around 1980 when the staff had increased to several hundred and about 280,000 participants were registered at courses of various length.

From the perspective of the Labour Party, the AOF lost its importance as a political support organization and became a source of revenue that bolstered some of the party's activities. The unions took on responsibility for more of the training of their members, and from the mid-1980s onward the AOF started to decline until today. It is currently a relatively small organization. It is still doing trade union education, however, and initiating a number of laudable educational activities for people with little formal education. The LO is also still arguably the most powerful organization in Norwegian society and plays its role vis-à-vis employers within the framework of the Basic Agreement of 1935. The Labour Party has been the biggest political party in every election since 1927 and still is. At the time of writing, the latest elections took place in the autumn of 2015 and Labour obtained thirty-three percent of the votes. The Conservatives came in second place with twenty-three percent.

*A note on sources* There are no known sources that discuss the AOF in the 1930s in English. All publications listed below are in Norwegian and have been used in preparation of this article. They are all to be found in the Labour Archives in Oslo. It would have been impossible to write this article without the existence of this institution and the kind assistance of the librarians working there. Not much has been published in English by way of general Norwegian

history. The best introduction to the last 200 years is probably Ivar Libaek, *The History of Norway after 1814* (Oslo, 2012).

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