

Johanne Stenseth Huseby and Sissel C. Trygstad

English summary of Faforeport 2026:08





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At the heart of the Norwegian working life model are the shop stewards, whose role is to safeguard members' interests through cooperation with employers at the enterprise level, including during challenging times.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck and Norway went into lockdown in March 2020, most enterprises had to adjust. The outlook was uncertain, unemployment was rising, and cooperation between the social partners was intended to help limit the pandemic's adverse effects (Fløtten & Trygstad, 2020). In several workplaces, cooperation between the social partners was strengthened during this crisis (Trygstad et al., 2021; Trygstad et al., 2023). These experiences, however, varied depending on how severely individual workplaces were affected.

Since the pandemic, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has caused widespread destruction and loss of life. For Norway, the war has led to an influx of refugees who need to be integrated into Norwegian society and the labour market. The war has also brought high energy prices, rising food prices, and inflation. In addition, the Norwegian labour market faces challenges related to demographic change and climate change (Meld. St. 31, 2024). Labour shortages and the need for transition towards a more sustainable and climate-neutral future are closely interconnected and call for more efficient ways of organising and performing work tasks. This will impact on which jobs emerge and which are phased out, and will shape skills demand in the years ahead. Many workplaces will therefore face major reorganisation, the implementation and consequences of which will largely depend on the quality of local cooperation between social partners. In other words, there will be no shortage of tasks for employee representatives.

This study examines the experiences of shop stewards in the United Federation of Trade Unions (Fellesforbundet), the Norwegian Union of Commerce and Office Employees (Handel og Kontor I Norge), and the Norwegian Food and Allied Workers' Union (Norsk Nærings- og Nytelsesmiddelarbeiderforbund). The data were collected between 2022 and 2025 and consist of a survey and 22 qualitative interviews. We investigate how workplace democracy arrangements function at the local level, particularly during restructuring processes, and shop stewards' assessments of their participation and influence. In 2015, we conducted a similar survey in the three trade unions, enabling us to compare selected findings across two points in time.

The shop stewards

The shop stewards included in this study represent a range of sectors and enterprises of varying sizes and have differing lengths of tenure in their positions. The share with long service is the highest in manufacturing. Several of the shop stewards highlight the sense of inclusion, as well as opportunities for networking and learning, as important reasons for taking on the role, and the large majority wish to continue if re-elected.

Shop stewards typically represent between ten and 24 members, although this varies. For example, in the retail and office sectors, it is more common to represent five members or fewer than in manufacturing. Time spent on shop steward duties is closely related to the number of members represented: the more members, the more time required. At the same time, around one in four report not having enough time. The shop

stewards describe everyday work characterised by “firefighting”, alongside efforts to engage in more long-term work related to skills development, recruitment, and apprentices.

Cooperation in times of crisis

The effectiveness of cooperation between the social partners varied during the pandemic. The extent to which enterprises were affected also varied. Four in ten shop stewards reported having more to do, and a similar proportion of enterprises performed better financially during the pandemic than in the preceding period.

Most enterprises introduced infection prevention measures, and working from home as well as digital communication became more common. Temporary layoffs were also common in some places, especially in the service and transport sectors. Shop stewards’ involvement in the introduction of infection prevention measures was closely linked to meeting frequency: the more meetings that were held, the greater the influence shop stewards perceived themselves to have on the implementation of such measures.

While the survey indicates that many did not experience changes in meeting frequency, several interviewees described frequent meetings. Some portrayed the pandemic as a turning point, where management recognised the value of the cooperation between the social partners in creating security and predictability. In some enterprises, the practice of more frequent meetings and more systematic contact continued after the pandemic. Other shop stewards reported being sidelined, pointing to factors such as a lack of involvement and limited communication. Some also described how management established separate forums without the participation of shop stewards or health and safety representatives.

Our findings suggest that the pandemic reinforced existing patterns of influence. Where labour-management cooperation was strong, it was further strengthened. Where it was already weak, these weaknesses became more apparent. Frequent meetings, particularly formal ones, appear to have shaped how shop stewards assessed both the information they received and their own influence during and after the crisis.

Workplace democracy arrangements

We have examined different workplace democracy arrangements and how their prevalence has changed over time. Our findings indicate a representation and participation gap in our sample. Safety representatives, working environment committees (AMU), and employee representation on company boards are statutory arrangements subject to threshold requirements. We find a decline in the prevalence of safety representatives in 2023 compared to 2015. This decline does not correspond with the findings of Statistics Norway, which show little change during this period. The prevalence of working environment committees has been more stable over time, while employee representation on company boards has increased slightly. For work councils, department committees and group-level committees established under the Basic Agreement, we also find a weaker position in 2023 than in 2015.

All enterprises included in the qualitative interviews described having some form of joint social partner meeting arena. However, the frequency and function of these meetings vary considerably and are related to the size and complexity of the organisation, and partly to the sector in question. Our findings show an increase since 2015 in the share of shop stewards who participate both formally and informally. Managers and shop stewards emphasise that both forms of participation are necessary. Informal contact can reduce friction, prevent misunderstandings, and ensure smooth problem-solving, but formal structures are also perceived as crucial, particularly where the cooperation between the partners is not as effective.

Influence and cooperation between the social partners

We find a complex picture in which perceived influence, structures and practices vary across sectors, organisational levels, and types of issues. A wide range of matters are discussed in the formal arenas of cooperation, but sickness absence and the physical working environment, which may be described as welfare-related matters, have been the most frequently discussed topics over the past three years. More strategic issues, such as climate change and the green transition, have been discussed to a much lesser extent.

Where early involvement, clear structures, and a combination of formal and informal channels are in place, cooperation is characterised by mutual benefit and trust. At the same time, the interview data show that the quality of cooperation varies. In the manufacturing and construction sectors, managers and shop stewards generally describe cooperation as effective, whereas in retail it appears to rely more on individuals and is supported by weaker structures. Shop stewards call for, among other things, earlier involvement. Managers also stress the importance of the timing of involvement, but there is not necessarily agreement between the parties as to what constitutes “early” involvement.

Compared to 2015, a slightly higher share of the shop stewards in 2023 report participating in both formal and informal forums with managers at their level, while the share reporting no participation in either formal or informal meetings remains stable. We find that the combination of formal and informal participation increases the level of influence the shop stewards assess to have. However, in order to exercise influence, issues must be placed on the agenda, and shop stewards must be involved at an early stage. The qualitative interviews show that defining what is “early enough” remains a challenge.

Trust

Shop stewards who participate in both formal and informal forums assess their influence as higher and report greater trust in their immediate manager and top management than other shop stewards. Those who do not participate both formally and informally report lower levels of influence and trust. We also find that the greater the influence shop stewards perceive themselves to have, the higher their level of trust, and vice versa. There is also, unsurprisingly, a strong correlation between trust in the immediate manager and in top management.

Fafo

Institute for Labour and Social Research

Borggata 2B, Oslo

P.O. Box 2947 Tøyen, NO-0608 Oslo

Telephone: +47 22 08 86 00

E-mail: fafo@fafo.no

fafo.no

