Importing Low Density Ideas to High Density Revitalisation

The ‘Organising Model’ in Denmark

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1. Introduction

Trade union membership levels in Denmark began to drop considerably from the mid-1990s. Especially unions belonging to the main union confederation in Denmark - LO - are experiencing massive declines in memberships and similarly to developments in other countries it is primarily younger employees, the unskilled and persons working in private services who opt-out of union membership. However, the decline is also exacerbated by the diminishing effect of the so-called Ghent-system, which consists of union affiliated unemployment insurance funds. Changes in regulation as well as caps on unemployment benefits have hollowed out the incentives to become a double-member of both union and unemployment insurance funds. In addition, competition from the so called ‘yellow’ unions – that are typically not party to collective agreements and reject taking industrial action – constitute a cheaper alternative to the traditional trade union movement. In other words, the LO unions are suffering from a general decline in unionisation, changes in the structural composition of the labour market and finally a competitive decline because of ‘yellow’ unions taking over. Responses to these developments have been somewhat tardy and piecemeal as unions are slowly waking up to the realities of a shrinking membership. Indeed, it could be argued that Danish union officials have had to reinvigorate recruitment and retention efforts after years with almost automatic memberships due to the Ghent-system. In their search for ways to re-vitalise union membership, officials have looked to their peers in Anglo-Saxon countries and have promoted the ‘organising model’ as a lifebuoy. The present article traces how these processes of import and translation of the ‘organising model’ have evolved and what they have meant for the organising efforts in a selection of unions belonging to Danish LO.

A first port-of-call is the puzzle of why union officials from a high union density country like Denmark chose to import a model from low density countries such as the US, Great Britain and Australia where success rates have not been uniform. The time-lag, between the big debates on the ‘organising model’ in the US, Great Britain and Australia on the one hand, and the import of the organising idea in a Danish context on the other, shows that the circulation of ideas is not a case of semi-automatic institutional isomorphism, but the result of an active import and translation process. To understand import and translation, we look at the various responses to membership decline already in action, such as service union strategies, partnership strategies or political lobbying for re-enchanting membership incentives. Similarly, we try to understand the interests of the union officials initiating the import of the ‘organising model’.

We therefore argue that it is important to understand how the organising model has been brought into Denmark. In other words, the manner of import and translation is by no means rudimentary and will have great significance for the efforts to revitalise Danish membership. As a corollary, tracing the process and actors who promoted the model is vital to understanding how Danish unions will try to counter-act the decline.

We base our analysis on in-depth interviews with union officials at federate and local union levels within two main areas of the LO-unions, construction workers and salaried workers. This is complemented by analysis of documentary material about organising efforts and quantitative data on union membership.
The analyses of the different processes for construction workers and salaried workers show how workplace and occupational characteristics, timing and agency have significant consequences for the import of the organising model, which in turn frames the re-vitalisation efforts of the future. The ‘organising model’ is coupled with other recruitment and retention schemes in a sometimes random fashion as campaigns and initiatives by local officials are seldom fully coordinated with union headquarters. Similarly, the analyses show that organising is in fact harder than it seems in a context of cooperative relationships at workplace level – indeed, often the problematic issues around which to organise are hard to identify.

The last finding points to the perhaps odd match of the ‘organising model’ and the Danish institutions of industrial relations. On one hand, shop stewards and local officials are in a privileged position to recruit members. On the other hand, local representatives do not identify themselves in terms of confrontation with the employer. Moreover, collective bargaining is carried out at multi-employer level and peace clauses exist at workplace level during the agreement period. This means that confrontational organising campaigns are short-lived if they include industrial action. Instead, some union officials are arguing for help to retain and recruit members at the workplace level from the employers—something, which has not materialised largely yet. Finally, Danes have regarded union membership as something almost automatic when entering the labour market – most prominently exemplified by the Ghent-system. Obviously, this is far from the logic of the ‘organising model’ and quite plausibly outdated.

The jury is still out on the success of the ‘organising model’ for Danish unions. Our analysis shows how the import and translation process have resulted in specific organising initiatives. Studies of the effects of initiatives are still too scarce to make any evaluation but our study shows that lack of coherency and model-fit to Danish industrial relations might hamper positive effects.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the following section, we very briefly outline some main features of the organising model in a union revitalisation perspective. The presentation is by no means meant as an exhaustive representation or an analytical framework. Rather it serves to situate our study. Next, we present our theoretical perspective on import and translation of the organising model to a Danish context. This section contains our main theoretical argument. Before the analysis, we briefly outline the method and data used for the study. The analysis is primarily qualitative focusing on social processes and actor perceptions. The actual analysis follows and falls into three subsection. First, we provide background information about the recent union decline in Denmark. Next, we analyse the import process of the organising model to Denmark. Finally, the translation processes in different unions are examined and compared. The findings are then summarised and discussed in the conclusion which tries to solve the apparent puzzle that Danish unions have looked to low union density countries for solutions to membership declines.

2. Union revitalisation and the Organising Model
The ‘organizing model’ was developed in the USA in an effort to revitalise trade unions and their ways of organising their members (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998). Later on it was introduced in the UK (Heery et al. 2000, p. 38) and other English speaking countries. In later years, it has gradually been introduced in a number of other European countries (Gall 2009b). In the face of long term membership decline, the organizing model was seen as an alternative to ‘passive recruitment’ (Kelly and Heery 1989), which relied on structural factors such as positive business cycles, shifts in the labour
market towards unionised sectors and specific labour market institutions as the generator of union members (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999). In addition, the union wage mark-up was – and still is – an important argument for membership. At the same time, the organizing model was seen as an alternative to ‘service unionism’, where unions try to attract members by offering specific and non-public services to avoid free-riding (Olson 1971). In that way, the organizing model can be seen as one approach to the recruitment and organisation of workers which stands in competition with other ways of approaching the issue (Heery et al. 2003).

On a more substantive level, the organizing model aims at empowering workers to “define and pursue their own interests through the medium of collective organisation” (Heery, Simms, Simpson, Delbridge, & Salmon 2000, p. 38). This in turn should make unorganised workers aware of the possibilities union contain and thus make them want to join. In that way, the organizing model can be regarded as revitalising old trade union traditions of combining union building with member recruitment. Especially as the organizing model places great emphasis on peer to peer recruitment and the activation of lay members in both the recruitment of members and the maintenance of union activities. However, the organizing model has some specific elements that may distinguish it from ‘classical’ organising. First, the organizing model is often employed through specific organising campaigns, often targeting groups employed in unorganized parts of the labour market. Second, there is a great emphasis on local injustices (as opposed to abstract market forces and class struggle) are often used as trigger in the efforts to mobilize workers (Kelly & Badigannaver 2004). Third, a number of specific techniques are employed during an organising campaign. These include mapping the target groups, identifying and contacting ‘leaders’ amongst the workers, identification of local controversies and firm specific pressure points as well as the setting of clear and timed objectives (Heery, Simms, Simpson, Delbridge, & Salmon 2000). In that way, the organizing model entails a very structured and systematic approach to organising.

The promise of revival and the spread across countries has given the organising model a lot of attention in the research literature. Some of the first studies focused on the actual implementation of the model, as well as the ‘tensions and difficulties encountered’ during this process (Carter 2000). Generally, it has been hard to show the effectiveness of the model for promoting membership gains. However, why this has been the case is still a matter of dispute. Some critiques argue that the model simply is not up to the challenge of reviving unions, others have argued that the model has been watered down (Bronfenbrenner & Juravich 1998). Some scholars point to lack of resources (Heery, Simms, Delbridge, Salmon, & Simpson 2003) and lack of scale (Gall 2009a) as the main reasons for the unsuccessful application of the model. Another debate revolves around the conceptualisation of the model, and asks whether it ‘represent a credible union renewal strategy’ (Carter 2006; De Tervelverville 2004). Some have stressed the problems entailed by the local focus on injustice and the lack of an overall political agenda (Simms and Holgate 2010).

Moreover, the challenges of practical implementation and strategic viability are exacerbated when attempts are made to implement the organizing model in institutional settings very different from the Anglo-American. Clearly, strong organisation of workers, understood both in terms of union density and the active engagement in institutional processes, is central to the functioning the labour market institutions (Jacobi 2003). However, at the same time, the strong institutionalisation of labour relations may pose a barrier to the implementation to the organizing model. In the Netherlands it
seems that “the strong influence of the consultative economy on Dutch unionism is hampering the embedding of activation efforts in more traditional unions practices” (van Klaveren and Sprenger 2009, p. 77) such as those revived by the organizing model. Likewise, some practices are not suitable as the industrial relations system are essential different. As Heery & Adler (2004) point out, ‘organising’ initiatives at company level is especially suitable for British industrial relations with decentralisation of collective bargaining and low bargaining coverage. In Denmark, bargaining (and the right to strike) is placed at the sector level and union densities are still rather high. This form of ‘organised decentralisation’ has evolved around what American labour market researcher, Walter Galenson, called "the Danish genius for compromise" (Due et al. 1993;Traxler 1995). In that sense, partnership strategies are long established in the Danish labour market, and introducing the more antagonistic organizing model may be challenging (Heery 2002). Thus, while declining union density in the labour market may call for alternative strategies, introducing the organizing model into a highly institutionalised context with a long tradition for pragmatic solutions may not be the most obvious choice.

3. Importing and translating the ‘organizing model’

As indicated, much of the literature on union revitalization in general and organizing more specifically is centred on the elaboration of challenges, discussion of strategies and evaluation of initiatives. While some research has focuses on the resistance to the ‘organizing model’ amongst regular union officials (Heery 2002), the actions of those opting for the ‘organizing model’ and the way in which the model is diffused, translated and institutionalised have received scarce attention. Arguably, the shift of focus towards internal union structures (Vandaele and Leschke 2010) opens the theoretical perspectives towards the problems of conceptualising and explaining institutional change. To highlight these issues, we draw upon debates on institutions and intuitional change.

Traditionally, the so-called neo-institutionalism has been regarded as an ensemble of theories explaining institutional stability. Institutions are generally defined as mechanisms that regularise agency and facilitate collective action, including how to ‘act as a trade union’. As such, institutions largely explain persistent national varieties of unions and how they adopt different strategies in their activities, e.g. organising members. However, the predictions of institutional stability made by traditional theories have been challenged by societal developments, and issues of institutional changes have come to the fore. Here, two different models dominate. One the one hand, variants of the punctuated-equilibrium hypothesis proposing that institutional change comes about in revolutionary departures from normal institutional equilibriums, i.e. abrupt and radical change usually due to external shocks or crisis (Campbell 2004;Thelen 1999). On the other hand, newer contributions focusing on incremental and/or evolutionary process of change (Streeck and Thelen 2005), thus trying to make institutional change endogenous to the definition of institutions. This means that while institutions might be essential mechanisms for coordinating and stabilising agency, they are always ‘on the move’ as social actors interpret and re-interpret in their practice. While we sympathise with these latter ideas, a crucial element in what we are studying is missed. Thus, we draw inspiration from institutional theories that put emphasis on the diffusion of ideas, the import and export processes that underlie this when in cross-border situations and the translation taking place when foreign ideas are used to promote institutional change. In this section, we briefly sketch out key concepts from the
importing ideas and institutional isomorphism

While the effort to redefine institutions and incorporate a dynamic view is an important step, it does not specify how, why or where change comes from. One often-used and obviously relevant strand of literature focuses on how ideas are spread across organisations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). In their widely cited article, Powell and DiMaggio (1983) argue that organisations often come to look alike as they scramble for seemingly effective solutions in an uncertain world. This leads to more or less uniform organisation structure and practices across similar organisations – in the authors’ words institutional isomorphism.

We use the word ‘import’ instead of spread to stress the conscious act of bringing the model to Denmark (and indeed paying for it). Accordingly, we can claim that the ideas underlying the ‘organising model’ were imported from Britain to Denmark bringing about a process of institutional isomorphism whereby model from one institutional context is brought into another.

As Campbell (2004) notes, however, the issue of isomorphism and spread of ideas should not be viewed as an automatic exercise. Scholars have begun to recognise the active entrepreneurship of actors in processes of institutional change. This somewhat echoes John Kingdon’s conception of ‘policy windows’, that is situation, in which perceived policy problems can be coupled with specific policy measures by policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon 1984). In this view, import of the ‘organising model’ required active entrepreneurship of union officials who found the ‘organising model’ to be a solution to the problem of Danish union revitalisation.

Furthermore, Campbell (2004) counters the view that import of ideas is a matter of copy-paste. First, the ‘organising model’ is by no means a uniform ensemble of recruitment practices. In Gall’s words (2009: 5) it ‘has transmuted into a broad hook on which to hang many ideas and practices’. It is therefore not clear what the ‘organising model’ actually is, i.e. there is room for interpretation.

bricolage and translation

The issue of import and translation brings us back to the issue of re-interpretation of institutions. Campbell (2004) argues that incremental change through new ideas will often be a matter of so called ‘bricolage’. The concept refers to institutional innovation whereby new ideas are coupled with old institutional logics to form the basis of new coordinated practices, i.e. institutional change. This way, the import of the ‘organising model’ should be viewed in its specific and innovative combination with existing institutions and strategies for recruitment and retention, for example member servicing as a selective incentive that is exclusively for members. Indeed, Danish trade unions have long ago started

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2 Three processes bring about isomorphism (p. 150-152). Firstly, coercive isomorphism stems from formal and informal pressures to adopt certain organisational features usually based on the need of an organisation to remain legitimate. Secondly, mimetic isomorphism stems from uncertainty about how to reach organisational goals and refers to organisations adopting seemingly ‘best practices’ in similar organisations in order to survive. Thirdly, normative isomorphism stems from professionals adopting generalised ways of ‘doing things’ that will cut across different organisations.
to search for the ‘magic formula’ for reversing membership decline and ‘organising’ is but one vessel among many aimed to bring workers back to shore. Bricolage is moreover an active process of social engineering as promoters try to fence-off opposition to change and vested-interest in status-quo. As Mahoney and Thelen argue (2010) institutional change also have distributional consequences and thus potential shifts in the internal power relations of unions. Some win and some loss by introducing ‘organising’ to Denmark.

A way to beat opposition is by coupling new ideas to old familiar institutions and thereby enhancing legitimacy of change. One important way for doing this, is to argue that ‘organising’ and mobilisation is in fact the ‘raison-d’être’ and life-blood of trade unions, traditionally framed in terms of class conflict.

Focusing on the actors and their interests is not an attempt to suggest any form of conspiracy or to denounce the model because it did not ‘come naturally’ but was ‘imported’. It is simply a way of trying to get a realistic understanding of the processes behind the circulation of ideas for union revitalisation that may otherwise seem completely random to some or – alternatively – self-evident to others.

4. Methods and Data
The paper is based on 20 in-depth interviews with centrally placed trade union officials. The interviewees were strategically selected because they were engaged in both the import of the organizing model to Denmark and the efforts to get it implemented locally and centrally in the different trade unions. Thus, the interviewees where selected after quite extensive research on who the central actors in the process were by consulting newspaper clippings, strategic union papers and publicly available reports.

Furthermore, internal reports from a number of trade unions were made available by the interviewees, and used as background information for the analysis. In addition to the interviews and documents, the background section draws on statistical data by the authors and others to describe the membership situation of Danish trade unions.

5. Analysis
The analysis is divided into three main parts. The first part describes the background of membership decline in Denmark using quantitative data. The second part analyses the import of the organising model to Denmark and is based on interviews with centrally place union officials – primarily at confederate and federate level. The third part analyses the varied responses of translating the organising model into actual practice in unions that organise two occupational groups; construction workers and clerical workers. The analysis of translation primarily builds on interviews with union officials at the federate level and branch level.

Background
No doubt, Denmark still holds a high ranking when it comes to organising labour. As the figures show below, Denmark – together with her Nordic neighbours – is still far above most OECD countries with 68.8 per cent of the labour force holding union membership in 2010. Studies suggest that a key

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3 One union official used the image of unions jumping from one vessel to the other in their search for solutions to revitalisation, never knowing if the actual measure would work in the end.
explanation for this prominent position of Nordic countries is the so called Ghent-system in which trade unions administer unemployment benefit system. The system make double-membership a natural choice for workers and as such membership of unemployment benefit foundations acts a selective incentive for union membership. A clear indication of the Ghent-system is the substantially lower union density in Norway where unions do not administer the unemployment benefit system (Due et al. 2010; Lind 2009).

Figure X: Union densities in OECD-countries 2010 + Denmark 1960-2010

What is the fuzz about then? From looking at the historical data in the above figure, union density began to drop significantly in the 1980s. And while levels recovered somewhat in the early 1990s, there has been a continuous decline since 1996 (Due, Madsen, & Dalskov 2010). As in other countries, the membership decline is also structural as workers leave high-density trades and industries – such as
manufacturing – to take employment in the service sector. This means that the unions belonging to the confederation for manual workers – LO – has been especially hit by decline going from 1.2 million members in 1995 to 0.9 million members in 2011 – the LO-share of total union members plummeting from 64,9 % to 51,6 % in the period (Ibsen et al. 2011: 105).

What is more alarming from a systemic point of view is that the relatively high union density disguises membership of so called ‘yellow unions’ that are by and large exempt from collective bargaining. In 2011, approximately 10 % of union members hold ‘yellow’ membership thus bringing the effective union density rate down to 60,4 % of the labour force.

Table X: Selected trade union density figures – Denmark 1996 & 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All employees</td>
<td>80,9</td>
<td>74,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>81,4</td>
<td>77,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>80,5</td>
<td>71,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>74,5</td>
<td>57,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-49</td>
<td>83,9</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-66</td>
<td>79,9</td>
<td>80,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Industry</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>83,6</td>
<td>75,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture/Energy</td>
<td>59,3</td>
<td>52,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>84,3</td>
<td>78,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>69,8</td>
<td>62,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel/Restaurants</td>
<td>61,7</td>
<td>48,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>85,5</td>
<td>79,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public services</td>
<td>88,8</td>
<td>85,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working time</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>84,5</td>
<td>78,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>66,2</td>
<td>53,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom quartile</td>
<td>74,5</td>
<td>62,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top quartile</td>
<td>78,6</td>
<td>74,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest obtained education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled</td>
<td>75,3</td>
<td>62,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>84,4</td>
<td>79,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short academic degree</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>73,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium academic degree</td>
<td>85,8</td>
<td>82,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long academic degree</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>75,7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ibsen et al. 2011

Recent studies show that ‘yellow’ members are predominantly found among unskilled, younger workers who sympathy with right-wing parties. Also, they are found in companies that are typically not covered by collective agreements and have no shop steward representing the trade union (Ibsen
et al. 2012). The latter finding is critical as shop stewards are a first port-of-call for organizing efforts. However, a recent survey reveals that shop stewards are often confused about their role in organizing as the responsibilities between local branches and shop stewards are not well defined (Navrbjerg et al. 2010: 83). These data point to a critical issue for organizing of both unorganized and ‘yellow’ members who are potentially ‘left alone’ while free-riding on collective agreements that are non-exclusive. Thus far, there is clear evidence of substantial membership decline in unions that are party to collective agreements. As Due et al. (2010) explain this development cannot solely be explained structural changes in the labour market since unions for professionals and academics are unable to ‘sweep up’ membership losses from unions for unskilled and skilled workers’ unions belonging to LO. The trends are well known within the trade union movement, however strategic action to reverse matters has been piecemeal or lacking, that is, until the ‘organising model’ came.

**Importing the ‘organizing model’ to Denmark**

Before we analyse how union officials imported the ‘organising model’ to Denmark, it is important to underline our main proposition: we claim that an institutional change has actually taken place in the Danish trade union movement. This is not a self-evident fact, but a contestable claim, which we will assert by presenting our data. Others might argue that the introduction of the ‘organising model’ is merely business as usual with little real effects on organisational structures and practices. In contrast to this, our data point to significant – but neither uniform nor ubiquitous – institutional change. In addition, we find intentional efforts to re-orient organising practices of some, not all, Danish unions. Our analysis shows that this institutional change came about by active import and translation efforts by a few key actors who more or less successfully frame the ‘organising model’ as a solution to the problem of union revitalisation in Denmark.

Nonetheless, the import of the ‘organizing model’ started by what might almost be considered a coincidence. The Danish trade unions have an internal educational program, FIU, offering a number of different courses to trade union officials. One of these courses was an English course for people within the local trade unions arranged by Greater Copenhagen section of the LO (GC-LO). The teacher on the course was a former British trade unionist who migrated to Denmark. Planning the course, he figured that a trip to Britain would help improve both general and union specific language skills of Danish trade unionists. Thus, he contacted former colleagues in the British trade union and persuaded them to host part of the course and give talks on their approaches to trade unions activity. In that way Danish trade unionist would both learn about the strategies of British trade unions, while at the same time improving their linguistic skills. The idea was inspired by a study tour in 2004, where representatives from all LO sections had been to England and heard about the Organizing Model. In GC-LO, the head of FIU had been on the trip and was very inspired by the talks given by British trade unionists. Therefore, she suggested that the content of the English course would focus more specifically on the Organizing Model. In that way, the Organizing Model was not essential to the course originally. It did, however, become the main attraction of the course.

As the first courses concluded, the GC-LO head of FIU registered that people came back highly enthusiastic and talking of ‘mapping’, ‘work place leaders’, ‘organizing’ and getting back to the roots of trade unionism. She therefore sent a newly hired female consultant to Eastbourne, where the courses were held. Her job was to be a ‘shadow’ of the English teacher and find out more about the exact content of the course. When she came back from the course in 2005, this consultant was as
enthusiastic as the others were. She felt that she had heard the British trade unionist put her practical approach into words, making the seriousness of the organizing problem more evident and offering means for becoming more systematic in the organizing efforts. Upon her return to Denmark, she was put in charge of the course and from then on came to play a central role in the importation and promotion of the Organizing Model in Denmark. First, she contacted a number of friends within the Danish trade union and encouraged them to take the course. As she explained in our interview, she selected the people recruited for the course with the strategic aim of getting people that would be able to ‘open doors’ for this approach to organizing. However, rumours of the course spread and gradually a large number of people came to take the English course. From 2005 to 2009 somewhere between 200 and 250 Danish trade unionists (mainly from the Greater Copenhagen area) took the course. While the GC-LO consultant was now in charge of the course, she also engaged in a number of other activities to promote the Organizing Model. First, she took the full ‘organizer’ education in Britain, earning her both an increased understanding of internal political and practical elements of the model, but also establishing a good network amongst foreign colleagues. Afterwards these colleagues have played a central role as ‘coaches’ in the importation and implementation processes. They have continuously given advice on both practical issues, but also on political issues regarding the handling of resistance and the promotion of the model within different parts of the trade union (local sections, federations, etc.). Second, she established a Danish organizing course, with an increasing focus on the practical implementation of the model in a Danish context. Third, she created a network amongst people that had taken the course in an attempt to facilitate follow-up and exchange of experience in implementing the ideas. Fourth, she took part in arranging a number of conferences of membership loss and organizing in general, but with the Organizing Model promoted as a possible solution to challenges. One of these conferences, held in January 2007, was titled ‘The top most lead’. With its emphasis on the importance of leadership in organizing processes, this conference was seen by many interviewees as a decisive event. Afterwards, a number of section presidents for unions in the Greater Copenhagen area decided to engage more formally in a network regarding the organizing efforts and the Organizing Model.

This network came to play a central role in the promotion of the organizing agenda from a local to a national level. To understand the importance of this, one has to understand that the importation of the Organizing Model is a part of a larger controversy within the LO-unions with regard to the organizing efforts and the division of labour between organisational levels. Originally, the members of the network were all engaged in the organizing efforts of local sections in Copenhagen and as such they engaged in consolidating the use of the model in their local sections. In the division of labour between sections, federations and confederations, the sections have the right to organize members. In that sense, working at a sectional level would seem natural in promoting the Organizing Model. However, despite the formal division of labour there is a constant struggle between the three levels regarding the efforts. Thus, the GC-LO consultant mentioned earlier came to be in charge coordination of the network between local sections with reference to a contract between LO-Denmark and GC-LO.

Since the LO congress in 2003 LO-Denmark had been given an increasing role to play in coordinating organizing efforts between federations. This focus on organizing members was, in turn, written into contracts between LO-Denmark and the LO sections. The LO-sections are partly financed by local sections and partly by LO-Denmark. This gives them a relative autonomy that is well illustrated in our case. The increased focus in the Organizing Model was facilitated by the contract with LO-Denmark,
filling out a void as GC-LO had no prior activity in this area. Not all sections in the Copenhagen Area have engaged with the Organizing Model and it might have been hard for GC-LO to get consent among the sections for their engagement with this model. However, as it was part of their contract with LO-Denmark, they needed no approval from sections. However, some federations wanted to limit the role of LO in the organizing efforts.

In this context, the network came to play an important role in institutionalising the organising model. Most prominently, they played a big role in getting the organization of member placed as a manifest theme for the 2007 LO-congress. The congress was of great importance, as a new general secretary was to be elected. The former vice secretary seemed like the obvious choice, but she had been challenged by one of the trade unions ‘grand old men’ who was unsatisfied with the agenda she stood for. Crudely put, the vice wanted to continue the style of political lobbyism and compromise of the old general secretary, whereas the challenger wanted to get back to the roots of trade unionism and active engagement with the members. Therefore, promoting the organizing theme clearly helped promote the challenger, who won a very close race between the two candidates. Several observers have noted that it was the speech of the challenger – emphasizing the organization of members and re-establishing links with the foundation of the trade union – that won him the post in the end. He was, many observed, talking about the theme that was on everyone’s mind. However, what is seldom told is that the reason it was on everyone’s mind was that key actors (especially from the Copenhagen network) had worked hard to place it on the agenda. An important detail about this story is, that the vote for general secretary was the last thing on the agenda, which means that the working program of the LO was already adopted. This working program, however, was in large part written by and for the former vice secretary, and contained few elements relating to organizing efforts. The network was successful in promoting the organizing agenda, in getting the general secretary they wanted and even in getting one of their own elected vice secretary in the LO. Nevertheless, they did not get a working program that would by itself allow for the LO to engaged with the organizing efforts. What this means was, that all LO-efforts regarding organizing were to be approved by the federations, and when the organizing-mood of the congress faded away, this became increasingly difficult.

In sum, the jealous defence by union federations of their autonomy impeded a coordinated import of the organisating model to Denmark. Organising was framed in a tight relationship to collective agreements which are the domain of unions federations – not the LO confederation. A by-product of this decision – which was not surprising to observers who know Danish industrial relations – was that the organising model was ‘left hanging’ despite its popularity. Putting the model into practice was now a matter for union officials at the federate and branch level allowing for uneven adoption and idiosyncratic translations. It is to this process that we now turn.

The varied translation of organizing for construction vis-à-vis commercial and clerical workers
As noted above, the ‘organising model’ was only partly institutionalised at the LO-Denmark level and union federations kept their traditional stronghold on membership revitalisation. This section reviews the actual translation of organising for two occupational groups; construction workers and clerical workers.

As the organizing model was introduced in Denmark, the Danish construction industry contained a number of different trade unions. First there is 3F, which is a general union for mainly unskilled
workers. It has a construction section that makes it one of the two big unions within construction. The other big construction union was TIB, organising carpenters, joiners and the like. In addition, there are three minor unions for painters, plumbers and electricians respectively. In 3F the organizing model was not taken up to begin with – at least not in the construction section. In the local Copenhagen section of the other four construction unions the model was introduced, but in different ways. In the TIB the organizing model was used as much as leadership tool as a recruitment strategy. On the one hand, the work place emphasis and effort to motivate workers to tackle problems by themselves are central, and there is a special focus on ‘tough’ firms where unions are weak and poorly represented. Nevertheless, there is also a clear acknowledgement that the Danish context is different from the British setting from which the model was exported. First, there are no votes regarding union representation. Second, there are no systematic ‘union busting’ from employers. Third, firm sizes are very different. Thus, some of the employer-targeting techniques seem less important, and the focus on leadership, prioritising organising efforts and managing the efforts of organisers is emphasised instead.

From the local level, the model was carried to the federal level by a local union official who became vice-president of TIB in 2008 exactly because of his strong dedication to organising efforts. This union official had participated in the British courses and was very active in the network mentioned above. As a consequence of his election, a large sum of money was invested in 2009 for implementing the strategy on a national scale. However, just as the implementation efforts had commenced, TIB started negotiating a merger with 3F. Continuing the ‘organizing model’ was one of the demands that TIB put forth, and in the final agreement it was maintained until 2013. As noted there was some scepticism towards the model in the old part of 3F. Thus the newly merged construction section now holds both some of the most enthusiastic promoters and some of the most sceptical opponents. As this new section represents 75 % of all construction workers, it is quite important for the continual promotion of the ‘organizing model’ whether it swings one way or the other in 2013, but for now it is unclear.

In the plumbers union, the model was introduced in the local Copenhagen branch as a part of the efforts of LO-Copenhagen. As the main promoter of the model at the local level became vice-president of the federation he introduced the organising model more generally across the union. This amounted in a project, which gave a temporary increase in membership. However, it is not all elements of the model that where equally emphasised. On the one hand, there is a focus on both organising and activating workers, peer-to-peer recruitment is used and the organising efforts are systematised by using some of the organising tools. On the other hand, the organising efforts rely heavily on the strong vocational identity of the plumbers rather than trying to build it from the ground. Furthermore, during the implementation there has been no doubt that the end aim is to get people organised in an effort to uphold the collective agreement standards and strengthen union power. In that way, organising and activating workers at specific companies, so that they can manage problems on their own, is not an aim in itself. In part, this has to do with the very small size of companies in this trade and the fact that the collective agreements are sector, rather than company, specific. Finally and again related to the size of companies, there has been a clear awareness that partnership and compromise is just as important as conflicts and organising campaign. In that way, the organizing model has been severely modified during the implementation, and mainly serves as a tool and a banner for emphasising the need for organising efforts in general.

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In the electricians unions, the organizing model was implemented gradually in the Copenhagen branch. First, more emphasis was put on officials getting out in the field and speaking with potential members and members alike. Second, a consultant was hired with the purpose of full time organising. Both initiatives, however, proved to have little effect, as organising efforts quickly drowned in servicing members and handling everyday labour disputes. Thus, the decision was made to radically reorganise the branch, establishing a unit working only with organising. This unit consists of one-fifth of all officials in the branch, indicating a significant strategic choice. Furthermore, the practical implementation of the model seems to be much closer to the original conception than what is found at for instance the plumbers unions. There is a strong focus on the individual workplace, on mapping and finding leaders and well as taking local issues serious. The dictum is that rather than going out to preach the wonders of unionism and solve problems with reference collective agreements, organisers should go out to listen to the problems that (potential) members have and empowering them to take action in relation to these issues. But where the local branch of the electricians unions seems to be more true to the conceptualisation of the organising model, the model has never moved beyond the local level in Copenhagen and some project in other local branches. None of the Copenhagen branch officials have moved to the federate level, which means that no one has promoted the model as a national strategy. Those initially importing the model have stayed in their branch, securing a less watered down implementation, but failing to promote it as a national strategy. It was proposed, but rejected as a federation strategy.

Finally, the painters union seems to resemble the electricians in the practical implementation. The organizing model is described as both a return to traditional union organising and making organising more systematic. Thus the organizing model has been used to promote the agenda of organising more generally. Nevertheless, more than such an instrumental use, the painters have also taken more substantial elements to heart. There is a strong focus on the individual workplace, on mapping and finding leaders and well as taking local issues serious. As in the electricians union there is an emphasis on taking local problems serious and listening, rather than just ensuring that collective agreement standards are upheld. The aim is not just getting more members, but getting more active members. Still, the small size of companies and the long traditions for partnership has made for modifications, and often social dumping caused by foreign workers have been used as an issue able to unite employers and employees. However, unlike the electricians, the painters have made the organizing model part of a national strategy. An initial organising project was used by the proponents of the model to general a congress debate about the issue. This led to quite radical changes in the internal structure. Normally it is the local branches that do the organising and set the membership fee, but with the organising initiatives membership and fee-setting was centralised. Thus an organizing secretariat was established at federal level, which oversees the organising efforts of six newly hired organisers. The move to the federal level was, once again, promoted by the president of the Copenhagen branch becoming vice-president of the federation. In addition, the centralisation of the organising efforts have insured that local commitment have not disappeared with the main promoters.

Turning to the case of the commercial and clerical workers union, CCWU, the variation of translating the model to the Danish context becomes even clearer. In March 2009, the local union, CCWU in Copenhagen, CCWU/Copenhagen – the largest local union in CCWU Denmark with approximately
100,000 members – decided to adopt and implement the strategy of organizing. It was decided on an annual general meeting of the union representatives, and the motive and reason of choosing the organizing strategy was that ‘... CCWU/Copenhagen should work as an organizing union, and ... a stronger CCWU would mean that a larger number of commercial and clerical workers would choose to join the union …’ (quoted from Evaluering af organiserprojektet i HK Hovedstaden 2011). The objective and hope was that particularly more young people would choose to join the union. The objective was also that more members would be active members and undertake the job as shop stewards and representatives of the union. In quantitative terms the objective was, that the total membership of the CCWU/Copenhagen would increase with 2 percent in total.

According to the CCWU/Copenhagen officials, the fundamental idea of the organizing model is, ‘...the union shall move back to the work place, so that the employees will experience to be a part of a professional community, feeling that they are themselves the key to change there working conditions in a more favorable way’ (HK Hovedstaden 2011).

The idea of adopting the organizing strategy was not decided and implemented by CCWU/Denmark, the national union of the commercial and clerical workers. CCWU/Denmark is an umbrella organization of four independent sections, covering the commercial, the industrial, the municipal and the state sector. The national union did formulate objectives for the future, concerning the total number of members, but the four sectors have the power to decide, which kind of organizing strategy the want to support, and they are financing and allocating the necessary resources for the activities.

The commercial and the industrial sector decided to reserve more resources for recruiting and retaining members, and it was up to the local unions the decide, whether they would choose the ‘pure’ organizing model or a more conventional recruitment or ‘sales model’. Each of the seven local unions in the two sectors could hire an extra union official for the organizing or recruitment job, and while three of the seven unions in the private industrial sector did choose the organizing model – inclusive CCWU/Copenhagen – all the seven local unions in the commercial sector did choose a more conventional recruitment model.

Understanding, why CCWU/Copenhagen did choose to work with the organizing model, it is important to know, that many of the leading officials of CCWU/Copenhagen have been travelling to UK, following the educations of organizers, and they have been a part of the organizing project in GC-LO. In addition the local union CCWU/Copenhagen developed their own ‘organizing-education’, and all the union employees followed this organizing-education. Therefore, they have from the start been part of the leading Copenhagen union officials, who were very much inspired and in favor of the organizing model as a tool to renew the union movement and change the strategy of the unions to recruit and retain members. The leading union officials in CCWU/Copenhagen regarded the organizing model as a new way to build a more active union. Going to the UK was seen as a first step, being educated and inspired, and this meant, according to some of the union officials, that ‘... we did not have to start from scratch, we had a foundation, we could build on...’. Another importing point, which is necessary to have in mind is that this union organizes the salaried employees. This ‘white-collar workers’ do not have a tradition of being activists at the workplace, taking actions against management and making conflicts. The normal union strategy is to be professionals, delivering competent service to their individual members. This ‘service strategy’ is the conventional way of running a union with salaried workers, but according to the leading union officials of CCWU/Copenhagen, this ‘service strategy’ had failed, and it was time to renew the union’s recruitment strategy. Therefore, in this sense, adopting
the organizing strategy was not just an attempt to be modern, but also a deliberate choice, trying to renew the union in a more fundamental way. If the strategy succeeded, building up collective agreements and electing shop stewards, the workplace would – according to the union officials in CCWU/Copenhagen – be ‘self-going’, and in this way, the local union could save resources for other purposes.

CCWU/Copenhagen has in 2011 conducted an evaluation of the results and effects of the introduction of the organizing model (HK Hovedstaden 2011, HK Privat 2011). The results are mixed, but the general experience is, that implementing the ‘pure’ organizing model is a long and quite difficult process, demanding many resources and patience. Union officials have also recognised that it is not possible to implement the organizing model in a common way. The work places and the employees in the area of the CCWU/Copenhagen are quite different and heterogeneous, especially when one compare the private and the public sector. In the private sector, the union density is low and the coverage of collective agreements and shop stewards are in general low compared to the public sector. Consequently, implementing the organizing model in the public sector must necessarily build on a co-operation with the shop stewards and the local union officials at the work place. Therefore, in this environment it is not a suitable strategy to create a more or less hostile atmosphere vis-à-vis management and start an action in order to create a community and eventually organizing the employees in the union. For that reason, the union officials in both the state and municipal sector have not implemented the pure organizing model, they are instead talking about ‘getting out of the house’, which consist of being more ‘visible’ at the work place level and pursue more or less traditional union activities.

So, according to the evaluation rapport, the conclusion is, that ‘... it is not about choosing the right model, it is about doing the right thing’. Organizing is about doing, what is relevant for the employees at the different workplaces. Organizing is depending of the firm specific culture and is depending on the persons, carrying out the organizing efforts. It is rather also rather difficult to realize the organizing ideas in small firms, and in many big companies, many professional groups are working together, making it complicated to pursue the method included in the organizing model.

The union did not succeed in realizing the objective of an increase of 2 percent in the total membership, but the fall in the membership was less compared with the membership fall in general in CCWU/Denmark. The leading union officials in CCWU/Copenhagen have – despite the rather poor results – decided to continue to implement the organizing strategy, for the simple reason, that all the alternatives are producing worse results. But the experience with the organizing model have learnt the CCWU/Copenhagen officials, that this model has to be supplemented with other kind of organizing activities, if the organizing union shall be successful.
6. Conclusion
We introduced this paper by remarking the puzzle that Danish trade union officials are looking to countries with low density and very different institutional settings for inspiration to revitalize and reverse the membership decline in Denmark. While the puzzle still persists from a logical point of view (it seems counterintuitive to copy countries with substantially lower density figures than yourself and with no unequivocal success rates), our analysis of the import and translation processes that brought the organizing model to Denmark shows that the puzzle can be explained by a number of social and political issues.
Firstly, the model provided a somewhat ready and implementable solution to the problems of organizing in the LO-unions. It was successful for a number of reasons that we will further develop in the points below, but a main reason was the appeal to traditional union ideals of mobilization and active members. This was being juxtaposed to solutions based on the servicing union model, which has been pursued as a retention and recruitment strategy for some years – with modest success. So despite the institutional ‘misfit’ of the organizing model to institutionalized collective bargaining at sector level and employment relations based on partnership in Denmark, the model still had an appeal to core values. These core values have become ever more pertinent as union officials are seeing the ‘yellow’ unions capture members. For many officials the membership decline is therefore not just an economic and political problem but also an ideological problem of getting back to active unionism that does not just service members but mobilise them.
Secondly, the analysis shows that the import and translation processes were highly contingent upon a few individuals who – almost by chance – were hooked on the mobilizing prospects of the organizing model. In a relatively short span of time, numerous union officials made the trip to Britain (and some to the US) to learn from unions that had long since re-directed their organizations towards organizing in the wake of massive membership declines from the 1980s and onwards. The course activity and the creation of certain networks formed a base from which a strategic struggle over the direction and internal organization of Danish trade unions could be fought. Connected to this struggle were also individual careers and power distribution within organizations. At confederate level, the new general-secretary of LO-Denmark was elected on a promise to put organizing at the top of the agenda – this in part made possible due to the active mobilization of support by the organizing network. Also at federate and branch level individual careers are at stake and we argue that the fate of the organizing model in individual unions is highly contingent upon these internal power struggles. Thus, while the literature has mainly focused on those resisting efforts of revitalising strategies and their vested interests, we emphasise that the actors importing the model and promoting this particular strategy for revitalisation equally have individual interests at stake (Heery 2002; Kelly 2004).
Thirdly, the import process proceeded in an uneven fashion in part because no coordinated strategy for organizing was decided at confederate level. The responsibility for organizing remains with individual unions. This means that the choice of coordinated strategies at federate level or independent strategies at branch level became the key battle for allocating resource to the organizing model. In some unions, such as TIB, Painters Union and Plumbers, the organizing model was institutionalized at federate level while it only got to individual branch level in HK and the Electricians. The reasons for these different choices can in the main be found by looking at how individual officers with a preference for the model were successful in rising to the federate level. The access to federate level decision-making was in some instances – like TIB and Painters’ Union – the key to forming a
coordinated federate strategy for organizing. Conversely, other larger unions like 3F, HK (CCWU) and Metalworkers’ Union have refrained from coordinated federate strategies by using the well-known criticism of the organizing model, which stresses its high costs, and lack of discernible net effects on membership rates. Recently, the election for general secretary in CCWU (commercial and clerical workers) was won by a former chair in CCWU/Copenhagen. In line with our results, his campaign accentuated the organising model. Time will tell if this means a coordinated federate organising model.

Fourthly, as noted in the theoretical section translation of the organizing model to a Danish context involved active bricolage and coupling of new ideas with old institutions. Many officials remarked that the organizing model was a return to old core values and traditional union activity stressing mobilization at the workplace. However, even the staunchest proponents of the model confirmed that considerable modifications were needed for the model to make sense in a Danish environment. Sector level agreements deflate much of the potential issues with which to organize. With generally consensual employment relations at the workplace with several high-commitment employee participation systems and shop stewards in place, the adversarial kick-start of organizing might be hard. Instead, Danish organizers have had to dig deeper to find items that are not traditionally considered the bread and butter of mobilization. Issues that might appear minor such as coffee breaks or the responsibility for providing required work clothes are examples of topics around which organizing campaigns have been carried out. Moreover, the CCWU case shows that the organising model might be ill suited for the public sector with highly consensual bargaining relationships and sophisticated union participation that do not encourage strategies based on adversarial discourse. Instead, unions in the public sector – like CCWU and FOA – are opting for an upgrade of already existing local activities that stress partnership with public employers. It thus seems that the model has been most widely adopted for larger private sector companies in which there is a member base that is lower than average but showing potential as worker discontent in these companies grows.

The latter point touches a more general problem with the organizing model in Denmark. Danish employment relations are highly institutionalized with systems in place for bargaining at various levels, sophisticated employee participation and local union representation. Furthermore, unions are highly involved in the administration of unemployment benefits and active labour market policies locally. The two main pillars of the Ghent-system – collective agreements and unemployment benefits – have produced a mentality by which the duties and organizational goals of union officials have been directed at maintaining and serving systems rather than organizing members. Organisation of members was and to some extent still is semi-automatic as workers ‘insure’ themselves against the arbitrariness of employers and risks of unemployment – and perhaps the latter reason has been and still is the most important.

As such, the organizing model – despite its uneven adoption – has served more to re-orient union officials to a new agenda than to produce immediate results. Admittedly, some unions embarked revolutionary-like changes to their internal structures, but few unions – perhaps only the Painters’ Union – have radically incorporated the model as the number one strategy for recruitment and retention. In most unions, membership strategies are multi-faceted, mixing different elements with different logics. The service-model still looms large in many unions and we see a continued reliance on initiatives aimed at technical schools to organise the younger workforce, visibility of shop stewards in the workplace and service phone calls to members for retention purposes.
With this in mind it is perhaps only in smaller unions with more militant leadership that the organising model will survive. Indeed, looking further ahead, the organizing model runs the risk of going out of fashion if results remain scarce and resources run low. The hope has been that organising would entail high initial sunk costs followed by low-cost self-running worker activism. Already, however, there are signs that a more watered-down model for organising is being preferred which rests on existing systems and thus requires less resources. Moreover, as in many other countries, the results of the organizing efforts are hard to detect. However, given the rather short life of organising initiatives, trying to assess the immediate effects of the organizing model in Denmark seems premature. Conversely, we can already now see the political and strategic use of the model in internal union struggles that have a clear bearing on the adaptation of model in Denmark. While Simms and Holgate (2010) may be correct in arguing that the organizing model does not entail a clear political strategy per se, it was used in a very political way inside the Danish trade unions on their quest for revitalisation.
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