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**Person in the News** **Unions**

## Marie Nilsson, the Swedish union leader taking on Elon Musk

IF Metall chief says country's economic model could be at risk in dispute with Tesla boss



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Marie Nilsson once said her strongest cultural memory was of attending an infamous Bruce Springsteen concert in Gothenburg in 1985. The crowd jumped up and down so much during his version of "Twist and Shout" that they damaged the concrete underpinnings of the Ullevi stadium.

The head of IF Metall, Sweden's largest industrial union, now has the chance to take part in an even bigger Swedish cultural event involving a powerful American: the 59-year-old has set the country's unions on a collision course with Elon Musk and his carmaker Tesla. The labour dispute, which has escalated almost daily over the past month, pits the Swedish view of trade unions being at the heart of its economic model against Musk's long-held antipathy to organised labour.

Nilsson has never shied away from a fight, becoming the first woman on her shift team after joining the chemicals group Borealis in western Sweden in 1982 and then the first female leader of the union with

300,000 members in a country of just 10.5mn people. “In this organisation, you can’t be a shrinking violet. It doesn’t really work,” she [told](#) labour journal Dagens Arbete in 2017 when she became president of IF Metall.

The bitter dispute with Tesla — Musk has branded the actions of Swedish unions “[insane](#)” — is particularly high stakes for Nilsson. She has argued that the [entire Swedish economic model](#) could be at risk if Tesla continues to refuse to sign up for collective bargaining. But some in the country’s business community have questioned this logic, fearing that a union known for being pragmatic with industry has turned unexpectedly hostile.

The conflict started at the end of October, when 130 Tesla mechanics belonging to IF Metall went out on strike. Things soon escalated through a series of sympathy actions, through which workers in other industries and unions made life harder for Tesla. Dockworkers stopped unloading its vehicles from boats, cleaners wouldn’t tidy its premises, and postal workers no longer delivered registration plates needed for new cars.

“Marie has a lot of common sense, and as with all IF people, she is very down to earth and business-oriented. But the measures now taken and the magnitude are surprisingly harsh . . . exceptionally bold, even aggressive,” says a business executive who has worked alongside Nilsson. “I think big companies largely accept the role of the unions, but many smaller companies don’t. Tesla is both big internationally and small — it only has a couple of hundred workers in Sweden,” says another executive who has worked closely with IF Metall.

Some business executives and members of the centre-right government seem to have sided with Musk, perhaps sensing an opportunity to loosen the hold unions have in Sweden. Under an agreement signed in the seaside town of Saltsjöbaden in 1938, unions and employer organisations jointly set everything from wages to working conditions in each industry, and the government cannot intervene.

Deepening Nilsson’s difficulties, some of Tesla’s Swedish employees have refused to participate in the strike. A repair centre in Stockholm visited by the Financial Times this week seemed to be operating largely as normal. The company has even won a [small legal victory](#), securing relief against the Swedish state, which was ordered by judges to let Tesla collect its registration plates directly rather than wait for them in

the post. And not everyone believes the dispute is crucial for the survival of Sweden's union culture. Erik Thedéen, governor of the country's central bank, has declined to comment on the dispute itself, but told the FT last week: "I do not think the collective bargaining system will be dependent on the outcome of this Tesla conflict."

Nilsson is unrepentant, telling the FT that more action is likely. IF Metall has talked with unions in Norway, Denmark and Germany to see if they can help the Swedish workers' cause. The union has enough money to pay the striking workers for decades, if not centuries, officials say.

The IF Metall president, who was raised on the pretty west coast of Sweden in Stenungsund, north of Gothenburg, is not likely to back down. Nilsson's policeman father looked after the local football team and her mother the gymnastics club, according to Dagens Arbete. She joined Borealis from school and worked there for 30 years. While there, she often took visitors up a 70-metre high tower at the factory, testing them for vertigo. She left in 2012 to join a union known for its close ties to business.

"IF Metall is one of the most flexible and industry-focused unions in Europe," one automotive industry manager explains. "They have welcomed automation and even defended downsizing of companies by saying this is the only way to survive. There is a big difference to [US union] UAW. Maybe that is why Musk gets it wrong". Analysts say the danger for Musk is that the Swedish dispute emboldens unions in other countries such as Germany, where it also has manufacturing operations, not to mention at home in the US. Some even think Tesla will have to choose between signing a collective bargaining agreement and leaving the country.

But Nilsson is keen to dampen the rhetoric. "We have no interest in them leaving Sweden. We think it's a good car and they are important for the green transition," she says. "We just want them to play under the same conditions that other carmakers do in Sweden."

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