

## **ABF – a short text on something large**

The Workers' Educational Association in Sweden (ABF) is the country's largest study association. In this text a short presentation is given of the ideas which are the basis of its activities.

### **For a better life**

ABF was founded in 1912 by the Social Democrats, the Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions and the cooperative movement. Behind its creation lay a dissatisfaction with the cultural and educational activities available for the working class. It was no longer acceptable that the upper classes made decisions over cultural life and what was to be taught in schools. ABF was driven by the desire to fight for a better life which was richer in content, both materially and from the point of view of knowledge. ABF was to be a popular education association which, at the service of the workers' movement, stood for culture and educational activities. During its first year almost one thousand people took part in its activities, today ABF attracts over 900.000 participants.

### **The individual in the centre**

The struggle for a better and richer life continues even today. The individual is still the important factor for ABF and the starting point that the impetus for development is the desire to learn something new and the pleasure in doing it. A popular movement is in continual movement, it builds on people's wish for change, will to fight and creative satisfaction. ABF would like, through its activities, to give each individual the opportunities to actively be able to participate in the life of society, to be heard, to develop and to create.

## **The popular movement and democracy**

It is only free and independent individuals who can form the basis of a democratic society. To create such a society the popular movements are needed. The idea of the popular movement is the basis of democracy for ABF. It is in working with the popular movements that people are given the opportunity for influence, development and education. Knowledge is needed to achieve this. The book and the written word are a major source of knowledge for study circles but it is not only knowledge from books which develops people. Art, the theatre, film and the mass media among others, are just as developing and instructive.

### **Dialogue as a source of knowledge**

The experiences of each individual and those of others are important sources of knowledge. Our democracy builds on the principle of freedom of expression. Everyone in Sweden has the right to express their thoughts and opinions in pictures, writing or speech.

In ABF's educational activities dialogue is an important element. Each and every individual has a wide variety of knowledge. Dialogue where openness and the testing of thoughts and ideas takes place is developing and instructive and compiles an important element of the educational activities. Dialogue as a method for attaining knowledge and testing thoughts with others is important both for the individual's development and for democracy within society. Through the exchange of ideas and thoughts we acquire understanding for the situation of others and can see ourselves with other eyes. Through giving a broad view of knowledge ABF would like to stimulate critical thinking and life-long learning process where curiosity is never exhausted.

## **The study circle**

The basis of ABF's activities is the study circle where the participants are placed in the center. The participants' experiences and knowledge shall guide the work.

The circle's activities build on shared work where the participants, together with the leader, search for knowledge and skills. The circle leader is the hub in ABF's method, it is the leader's involvement and knowledge which give substance to ABF's pedagogical idea and create the climate in which the participants can grow. ABF's long experience shows that the best study result is achieved when a small group of people, voluntarily and because of their own interest, come together to pursue studies over a longer period of time. The participants and the circle leader decide on the study programme together. The subject of a study circle can vary - nothing is impossible...

## **The need for guidance**

Culture in society shall not be directed and carried out by a few people. What is good or bad culture is up to each one to decide for him or herself, for who can really say what is good or bad culture? Today the larger part of culture available is directed by commercial interests and most people are consumers of what is offered.

ABF's aim for cultural activities is to give everyone, irrespective of age, sex, origins or handicap, the same right to create his or her own culture. Even culture which is not profitable must exist. It is people's needs and not profitability which shall determine activities. Hundreds of thousands of people participate in ABF's different cultural groups. Through creating something themselves - sewing, photography, acting, writing, playing in a group or painting - both creativity and knowledge are developed. The feeling of having achieved something

reinforces self-esteem. It is satisfying to be able to feel that you are good at doing something, that you can create something which is your own instead of all the time merely experiencing culture created by others.

## **Adult education for young and old**

ABF is working for a development of the basic school system which will ensure that differences in education are levelled out. The ambition is to achieve a general high level of education for the entire population. As long as society has not succeeded with this ABF must, exactly as in the infancy of the workers' movement, step in as support and also contribute to spreading basic knowledge. ABF organises study circles in essential basic subjects for those who feel that they have missed these during their schooling.

In society today there is a constant need for new knowledge. Society and the world beyond are changing at a furious pace. ABF organises study circles so that people, quickly and in a flexible manner, will be able to assimilate new and necessary knowledge. ABF's adult education is aimed at everyone, both young and old.

## **Building bridges**

Even if it is still the Swedish culture which dominates, Sweden is today on the way to becoming a multi-cultural society. To accept cultures and understand people from other countries can be difficult. ABF wants to work for a society which is more open to other cultures, increase understanding for other people and fight racism. Hostility towards foreigners and racism are often the expression of fear - a fear which many times originates in poor self-esteem. To reduce this fear of the unusual and new is a part of ABF's activities. For this reason there are study circles where both Swedes and immigrants participate, lectures are given and seminars held to

increase understanding for each other and build bridges between different cultures.

Everybody irrespective of cultural background, has for ABF the same right and obligation to participate in society. Even if everyone is welcome to participate in ABF's activities, special efforts are made to offer studies to those with a limited education, the handicapped and immigrants. Most to those who have had least is ABF's basic principle.

### **ABF in the world**

There has always been a tradition within ABF for working internationally. ABF is a member of the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA). Moreover the Nordic countries have joined together to form Nordic ABF. Through these organisations formal contacts are maintained. Of the 60 affiliated organisations in IFWEA, ABF is the largest where aid is concerned. Today ABF has aid projects in Asia, South America, Eastern Europe, Africa the Middle East and Russia. ABF does not work with a country's state authorities but with other popular education organisations. The most important task is, together with the grant receiving organisation, to develop different types of popular education inputs. From the needs and situation of each country are worked out, for example, circle leader training and organiser training, so that the organisations can later grow and develop on their own. ABF's aid to countries in need consists of transference of knowledge and the aim is to contribute to a democratic development.

### **Country wide activities**

ABF has no individual members, only different organisations can be members. The

workers' movement, the handicap movement, immigrant organisations and the pensioners' organisations comprise the largest part of the forty-nine organisations which are affiliated to ABF. ABF is found throughout the entire country, from the rural areas to the cities. From Kiruna in the north to Trelleborg in the south, districts and sections create a series of centres of knowledge for ABF's activities. Each week hundreds of thousands of people meet here to pursue studies or culture together. ABF's size and scope are illustrated, not least, through the fact that nine out of ten Swedes know about the organisation and its activities.

### **Finally**

The Workers' Educational Association has as its aim, through free and voluntary educational, activities based on the principles of equality, solidarity and democracy to:

...further and itself participate in a transformation of society in keeping with the basic values of the workers' movement.

...educate the members of its affiliated organisations for tasks within association life, working life and society

...as well as create the preconditions for participation and freedom of choice in education and cultural life for everyone.

These aims are just as relevant today as in 1912. We live in a society characterised by constant changes both in the world at large and in people's values. In such a society popular education plays an important role.