

Rightwing violence in Sweden

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The actions of neo-Nazis in Sweden have for some time been taking more violent forms. In 1999 alone there were three murders and a bomb attack:

* In June 1999 a journalist and his eight-year-old son were seriously hurt by a car bomb. Together with a colleague, the journalist had been investigating and reporting Nazi activities in Sweden.

* In October 1999 fascists murdered the trade union leader Bjoern Soederberg, who had been seeking to remove right-wing extremist Robert Vesterlund from his post as a shop steward. Vesterlund is thought to be a member of the violent Swedish fascist organisation, the Arian Brotherhood or *Nationalsocialistisk front* (NSF — National Socialist Front). After he was removed from office Vesterlund was heard to say, "it is time to take drastic measures". He requested, and received, a photograph of Soederberg from the passport authorities.

* During a bank robbery in Malexander, two policemen were shot from close proximity. The culprits came from the periphery the Arian Brotherhood. They received logistical support from Svea SA, an organisation that maintains close relations with the NSF.

* The Swedish ex Justice Minister Leila Freivalds received a letter bomb, which did not explode.

* Criminal offences by right-wing extremists are increasing, with 2,703 registered in 1999. Since 1990, 16 murders of foreigners, homosexuals and policemen are on the record.

What is new is that the neo-Nazi violence is now openly directed against representatives of the state, the legal system and the press. Death threats against judges, state attorneys and journalists are increasing. Witnesses in criminal proceedings against neo-Nazis are being intimidated, so they do not make any statements or withdraw those already made. The actions of the extremist right are facilitated by the so-called "principle of public openness", under which it is legally possible to obtain information and even photos from the authorities of other persons and their families. The police are obligated to provide information about anyone if this is contained in "public documents".

Sweden's immigrant population has been exposed to violent assaults, arson attacks and racist insults for years. The situation intensified in the early nineties, when the number of asylum-seekers rose sharply due to the civil war in Yugoslavia. Official political discussions stirred up the topic of immigration. Asylum-seekers and immigrants served as scapegoats for the country's worsening economic position and the government issued harsher regulations concerning immigrants.

In 1992 there were 79 arson attacks on asylum-seekers' hostels. Not all these racist attacks could be ascribed to organised fascist groups. Studies showed that violence was often committed against asylum-seekers by drunks and backward young people, who were encouraged by official propaganda to believe that the increase in asylum-seekers was responsible for rising unemployment at the beginning of the 1990s.

Official policies were not only an important cause of neo-Nazi violence; it also ignored it, played it down and encouraged it for a long time. Already at the beginning of the 1990s offences by right-wing extremists were being registered. However, instead of being regarded as a political problem it was seen as a sign of misled youth or mindless thugs, which

would be counteracted by re-socialisation measures. Although this was dropped, later the courts treated neo-Nazis as harmless fools. In the meantime, the authorities started to act somewhat more harshly, because the ruling circles feared Sweden's economy and image might be damaged as a consequence of right-wing violence.

The Swedish model

Particularly in the period after the Second World War, Sweden acquired a reputation for being an exemplary welfare state. Its official policy of neutrality had largely protected the country from the negative consequences of the war. Swedish industry could rest on a production apparatus that was intact. On the basis of the worldwide economic recovery, the various social democratic-led governments created a network of social benefits and protection, as well as expanding the public sector. The close cooperation of the trade unions with the employers and the government ensured the social peace was hardly disturbed by strikes. The welfare state seemed to confirm the reformability of capitalism and the viability of a third way between capitalism and socialism. Swedes had neither to fear old age, illness or unemployment, since social insurance benefits were extraordinarily generous.

The oil crisis of 1973/74 shook this confidence. The Swedish economy, strongly dependent on oil imports, was hit hard. Economic growth, which had run at up to five percent a year in the 1960s, sank to two percent. This rate was still maintained in the 1970s, but fell in the 1980s and 1990s. While Sweden's per capita gross domestic product in 1970 put it at third place in the list of the 24 OECD countries, it had fallen to 14th place by 1991. Unemployment and national indebtedness rose substantially.

In 1976 the Social Democratic Party (SAP) were voted out. For the first time, the Conservative government (1976-1982) implemented cuts in social security benefits and lowered taxes and contributions for enterprises and capitalists.

Increasing globalisation had extensive effects on the Swedish economy. Sweden had already become an industrial nation since the beginning of the 20th century, and was strongly integrated into the world economy. However, its relatively small domestic market meant that the Swedish economy has always been heavily dependent on exports. More than 40 percent of Swedish industrial production goes abroad. With globalisation, not only trade but also production is increasingly organised internationally and subjected in all aspects to the dictates of the global financial markets. Thus the international recession at the beginning of the 1990s had particularly serious consequences for the Swedish economy. Some traditionally important branches of industry—textiles, iron ore, ship building—could not maintain ground on the world market against competition from the cheap wage countries of Southeast Asia and southern Europe, as well as from Australia and Brazil (iron ore) and largely lost their significance.

Unemployment, which at the beginning of the 1990s was still just 1.5 percent, rose quickly to heights that had only been seen previously during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and in 1994 had reached around 14 percent. The Conservative government under Carl Bildt (1991-94) and their Social Democrat successors have implemented drastic cuts in many areas. Among other things cut were unemployment pay, the continued

payment of wages during sickness, education grants and child benefit, as well as so-called family benefits paid during maternity. In 1995 the SAP government adopted a pensions reform, which meant a drastic worsening of payments for all those born after 1954. Parallel with these cuts, taxes for the wealthy and for enterprises were lowered considerably. Over the last years, stock exchange speculators could make a killing in Sweden as well.

Sweden's entry into the European Union in 1995 also contributed to the destruction of the welfare state. In order to fulfil the criteria of the Maastricht Treaty, which required the reduction of national debt and inflation, crisis packages were applied and austerity budgets carried through. Above all, the cutbacks hit the public sector, which included the major part of the national workforce. Swedish companies underwent fusions and shifted sections of their business abroad to countries with lower labour costs.

The Swedish employers' association forced the abolition of the system of centralised collective bargaining, which was abandoned in 1990 and replaced by negotiations with individual trade unions. The result was a more differentiated wages development and income differences increased. To even these out through so-called "wage policy solidarity" had been an important constituent of the Swedish model.

The policies of the last ten years hit the socially weak—the unemployed, families with children, young people, immigrants, refugees and the sick. A study published in the medical journal, the *Lancet*, in 1999 points out that health inequality is more pronounced in Sweden and Scandinavia than in the rest of Europe. Responsibility lies not only with the conservative parties, but above all with the political force that was identified with the development of the Swedish welfare state - social democracy.

The social consequences of this are regarded by many as a cause of the increasing right-wing extremist tendencies in Swedish society. Without doubt there is a connection, but what must be examined is why the hollowing out of social gains has not resulted in a rebellion by working people against capitalist society.

The ideology of the Swedish model

The reasons can be found in the ideology and policies underlying the Swedish model. In 1928 Per Albin Hansson, the then chairman of the SAP, advanced his "*Volkshem*" (Peoples' Home) theory. Through the "reduction of all social and economical barriers in the society," the Swedish *Volkshem* should offer security for its citizens. The right to work should be balanced equally with the right of capital to make a profit and thus the class contradictions balanced out.

In his theory of the *Volkshem*, Hansson compared Swedish society with a family, in which the individual members must subordinate their interests and actions to preserving the family. Conflicts must be resolved by sitting down at the table and reaching consent.

Hansson thereby transferred the reformist positions of international social democracy to Sweden. Within the context of the national economy, the close collaboration between labour and capital should mean a balancing of interests, differences in incomes being levelled and social peace secured.

The LO trade union federation cooperated closely with the employers' association (SAF). Finally, this class collaboration was officially established in the Saltsjöbaden agreement of 1938. A clever system of collective bargaining and for resolving labour disputes was created and extended by the mechanism of numerous committees that had the final word in cases of disagreements. The main target was reaching a consensus and avoiding labour disputes.

An important role in this class collaboration was played by the close organisational relationship between the social-democratic party (SAP) and trade unions (LO). During the establishment of the LO in 1898, the congress decided upon compulsory SAP membership for all union members. And until 1987, 97 percent of the SAP membership came from

the LO. Demands and aims that the LO could achieve in negotiations with the employers, it sought to gain via its parliamentary lever, the SAP.

The control of the SAP and LO over the working class was hardly ever seriously endangered from the left. The Communist Party of Sweden, founded in 1921 as a section of the Comintern, had already split by 1924, with the minority entering the SAP. Over the past decades, the Swedish Stalinists, who for a long time called their party "left wing", acted to ensure a parliamentary majority for the SAP. Since the last general election in 1998 (where it gained twelve percent of the vote), it has raised its own claims, but its "opposition" does not come from the left. In particular, it rejects Swedish membership of the EU out of purely nationalist considerations.

The politics of the welfare state could only succeed, as long as the national economy played a relatively independent role in the context of the world market. Under conditions of economic growth and increasing profits, the working class was able to ensure its wage rises and social benefits by means of its traditional organisations. However, the internationalisation of production means the national economy and the national state have lost their relative independence. In the meantime, the world market and the international financial markets dominate every aspect of the economic and social policies of individual governments. The bitter competition of the large transnational companies threatens to restrict wages, conditions of work and social security benefits, in order to preserve their position against competitors on the world market. In this way, the material basis of the policy of social equilibrium is eaten away.

The decades-long domination of social democracy in Sweden—as in many other countries—has led to an incapacitating and political disorientation of the working class. In place of political education and the promotion of independent thinking and action, the policy of the welfare state means the bureaucratic subordination of the working class. Working people were disarmed politically and ideologically and are therefore unable to counterpose their own political perspective to the attacks on their gains, which today are carried out by "their" SAP. It is in this vacuum that the right-wing extremists currently prosper.

It is not inevitable that this will remain the case. A political reorientation of working people is necessary. The working class must oppose its own internationalist programme, which strives for a socialist social order, to the nationalism of its existing organisations, which subordinates people's needs to the accumulation of profit. This is the way out of the dead end, into which the policy of the welfare state and class collaboration has led.



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