Swedish general election campaign focuses on immigration

Steve James
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Opening exchanges in the Swedish general election, to be held on September 15, have centred on immigration. Lars Leijonborg of the small Liberal Party, one of the four right-wing parties that constitute the alternative coalition to the ruling Social Democratic Party (SAP), called for large numbers of guest workers to be imported. Leijonborg told Radio Sweden, "You have to be an American data engineer with a job at IBM to possibly get a work permit, otherwise this kind of job-related immigration hardly exists at all.... This hampers Swedish growth and Swedish welfare."

Leijonborg insisted that, in contrast to guest workers brought into Sweden in the 1960s and 70s, the new proposed labour pool should consist of non-citizens. Guest workers should be returned to their country of origin within three months of the end of their contract, avoiding any welfare payments. Only after three years work could a guest worker even apply for citizenship, and this could only be granted after five years. The largest right-wing party, the Moderates, quickly supported this with a call for two million guest workers to be imported over the next 15 years.

SAP Prime Minister Goran Persson, echoed by his informal coalition partners the Left Party, denounced the proposal, insisting that Sweden would not require guest workers for at least ten years. He said that more efforts would be made instead to push foreigners already in Sweden off social benefits and into the labour market. Companies should be offered subsidies to take on unemployed immigrants.

In calling for more guest workers, Leijonborg and the Moderates are both demanding cheaper labour for Swedish business and trying to prod the SAP into deeper attacks on welfare. The SAP is tied to the trade unions—80 percent of Swedish workers are union members—and the leading union federation, the LO, is opposed to a migrant workforce on barely concealed chauvinist grounds. In the last period of labour importation up to 1972, Sweden attracted working people from Finland and many parts of Southern Europe, until the practice was stopped at the behest of the LO.

Underlying the calls for the creation of a pool of cheap guest labour is the precarious situation of several of Sweden's leading corporations. Despite the economy giving an appearance of relative health—unemployment is only at four percent and growth is expected to exceed government expectations this quarter—many of Sweden's large companies are mired in debt and scandal, while the Stockholm stock exchange has fallen by 40 percent so far this year.

Telecoms giant Ericsson will have laid off 47,000 workers by the end of 2003. It recently posted the largest corporate loss in Swedish history and is under pressure as to its capacity to fulfil its pension obligations. Last month engineering corporation TNC ABB admitted that its accounting practices were hiding substantial losses, while its parent company, Investor, the family firm of the Wallenbergs, is under pressure from a shareholder rebellion and public outrage at gigantic payoffs made to its leading executives. The stock exchange collapse will have a broad impact, as up to 80 percent of the Swedish population are shareholders.

Faced with these pressures, the question being raised by all the political parties is how to free up the resources currently spent on social welfare to directly expand profit. All concur that welfare has to be cut and more privatisation introduced into health and education, disagreeing only on how this can be implemented.

Public spending in Sweden has fallen from 70 percent to 54 percent of GDP over the past decade. In the same

period, the SAP, in power since 1994, turned a budget deficit of 12 percent of GDP into a surplus of 4.8 percent. Investment agencies worldwide hail this "extraordinary" turnaround, but more is required. The SAP has already announced its intention to introduce measures to halve the number of workers on sick pay, particularly in the public services, by 2008. Currently, 340,000 workers are on sick leave and another 470,000 on disability pensions, out of total population of only nine million.

Directed against the entire working class, new social attacks will impact on its most oppressed layers, and will deepen social tensions in a country once hailed as the epitome of welfare-state capitalism.

Amongst immigrants, unemployment is three times higher than the national average. The immigrant population is concentrated in isolated estates around the major cities, particularly Stockholm and Gothenburg, some of whose populations are 80 percent migrant. The estates were built in the 1960s as part of a "million homes" building drive to eradicate chronic overcrowding in the cities and designed as commuter zones. They have few local jobs. According to *Migration News*, of the 14,000 residents of the Rinkeby estate near Stockholm, and the Hjaelbo area of Gothenburg 70 percent live on welfare benefits and employers will not hire anyone from there.

This is what lays behind the call from all the parties for resources to be directed towards "integration"—to release new workers as sources of cheap labour. Leijonborg told Radio Sweden, "We do not have an immigration problem, we have an integration problem." His comments were supported by Maud Olofsson, leader of the Centre Party, also in the right wing coalition, who declared, "We are not for strong walls.... the best way to integrate is to get a job."

Such basic economic considerations is why Swedish politicians have refrained from directly scapegoating immigrants in the manner that has become common currency in neighbouring Norway, and more so in Denmark and the Netherlands. Shortly before calling for increased immigration, Leijonborg debated against both the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party, who had taken full page adverts out in the Swedish press, and Sweden's indigenous, and hated, far right led by ex-Moderate member of parliament Sten Andersson.

In any case, Sweden already has "strong walls" constructed by the SAP—by far the largest party, dominant for most of the post war period and likely to win the election. After the trade unions called a halt to work immigration in 1972, legislation was progressively tightened against the growing number of refugees worldwide until 1994, when nearly 79,000 people moved to Sweden, including 33,500 from the Balkans. By 1995 immigration had fallen to 32,500, when Human Rights Watch criticised the "increasingly restrictive asylum policies". According to *Migration News* the then SAP government made a public example of the Kurdish Sincari family who were forcibly deported in 1996.

A picture emerges of a ruthlessly enforced asylum system, but one from which the most notorious excesses have been removed as a result of public outcry. The system is held up as example to the world. Prior to 1997, according to an advice paper prepared for the Australian government by Melbourne University, for example, the Swedish Federal police were responsible for immigration and detention centres, hiring private contractors for daily operations. A series of suicides, hunger strikes, violent deportations and one hostage taking, forced the SAP to hand over control of the immigration centres to a Migration Board, whose job was to create a "more civil, culturally sensitive and open detention policy". This involves a somewhat more open and comprehensible system, with caseworkers replacing police.

As a result Sweden has the lowest level of non-documented "illegal" immigrants of any country in Europe, despite the fact that only 40 percent of asylum claims are accepted. Between January and July 2001, 2,475 people were "voluntarily" deported, while 588 more were handed over to the police for deportation, during which the use of shackles is permitted. In 2001 a scandal erupted over entrapment tactics used to deport Flurim Krasnici, a Bosnian asylum seeker. The Migration Board sent him a bogus job invitation. On arrival for the interview, he was immediately arrested and deported.