

# A reply to a reader on the Vaxholm builders' dispute in Sweden

4 August 2006

*The following email was sent in response to the article "Sweden: Lessons of the Vaxholm builders' dispute." The article's author Steve James replies.*

This article was pretty informative, and so worth reading, but it ended with a load of twaddle. What common interests do Swedish and Latvian workers have? None that I can see. Swedish workers are heirs to the struggles of their forefathers for better wages and conditions. They have a right to preserve those conditions, and it's good to see that in this case they won out. Latvian workers, on the other hand, haven't struggled for better wages and conditions and have no right to profit from the struggles of past generations of Swedish workers by working in Sweden for better wages than they would get at home.

JM

Dear JM,

Your national chauvinist remarks express, in a particularly crude and ignorant manner, the interests of the same trade union bureaucracy from which we insist workers must politically and organisationally break.

What you propose is not only the division of Swedish and Latvian workers, but the division of workers everywhere. You effectively advise workers to continue the alliance with national capital, in Sweden and anywhere else, which has led them into their current political paralysis in the face of war and the endless downward spiral of living standards. Your perspective is entirely historically bankrupt.

The globalisation of capitalist production, which triggered the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, has undermined the national reformist perspectives of social democrats the world over, including the much vaunted "Swedish model."

Representing an enormous step forward in terms of the productivity of labour, the globalisation of production under capitalism enables big business to encourage new levels of competition between workers. This leads directly to a global levelling down of the living standards of the masses around the world. No country, even the richest, can attract and retain globally mobile investment when advanced social provision to ordinary people represents a drain on profitability.

This is seen in a particularly sharp form within the European Union. The EU's predatory expansion into the former Eastern bloc is designed to open up new sources of cheap skilled labour

for European corporations, allowing a generalised attack on living standards and welfare concessions. This is what can be seen in the Vaxholm dispute, and numerous other circumstances in which workers from Eastern Europe have been deployed to undermine the living standards of those in the West.

These changes in the roots of the productive process constitute the objective basis for the transformation of the social democratic parties and the trade unions into instruments for increasing the exploitation of the working class. Tony Blair's Labour Party is only one of the sharpest expressions of this process. Social democrats worldwide have abandoned any defence of living standards and have rapidly evolved into warmongering parties of the super rich. Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson's Social Democrats and their left allies are rapidly moving in the same direction.

The trade unions, regardless of their ostensible political colouration, have been transformed into instruments of corporate management. Advancing themselves as tools for social peace and industrial stability, the trade unions sabotage every struggle, isolate and divide workers while defending their position and alliance with government and the corporations.

This is why at Vaxholm the unions' primary goal was not the defence of building workers conditions, but the defence of collective agreements. In the article, I explained that the main beneficiaries of the protracted manoeuvres around the Vaxholm dispute were not Swedish or Latvian workers but the Swedish union bureaucracy. The agreement they concluded in 2005 with the Swedish Employers Federation, Svenskt Näringsliv, set out terms through which the Swedish unions and employers together would manage the importation of east European workers to undermine wages and conditions in Sweden.

This certainly expresses the basic orientation of the trade unions, which is to uphold the interests of "their" own national employers by presenting themselves as the best means through which to organise social peace and increased productivity from the working class. This was the view of the Swedish government, which is why it supported the Swedish unions over Vaxholm.

Clearly it is your view too.

What is particularly striking about your remarks is the contempt you clearly feel towards workers in Latvia and, by

extension, Eastern Europe and other impoverished areas of the world.

In answer to your slander that Latvian workers have not struggled, and therefore “have no right to profit” from past trade union struggles in Sweden, it should be noted that Latvia and other east European states were an arena in which the great events of the twentieth century were fought out. Indeed, workers and the intelligentsia in Latvia contributed significantly to attempts to replace capitalism on a world scale.

As early as 1904, Latvian Social Democrats had founded a paper, *Zihna*, which was deemed illegal by the landlord government. Social Democratic conferences were also illegal, and were held abroad with delegates representing thousands of members. In 1905, with Riga one of the most industrialised cities in Russia, the workers rose against the Tsar, while the peasantry revolted against the Baltic German landowning nobility. Much of the countryside was razed in response.

During World War One, part of the Eastern Front went through Latvia. Disillusionment and wholesale slaughter amongst Latvian troops contributed to the collapse of the Russian Army, while Bolshevik propaganda was well received.

A Latvian Soviet was established simultaneously with the October Revolution, but was overwhelmed by German armies. In 1918 another Soviet government was established which collapsed in mid-1919 under the pressure of German and British imperialism. A weak bourgeois government was established with which the Bolsheviks were able to make peace. The bourgeois regime staggered on until a right-wing coup in 1934.

The Soviet Union, now under the leadership of a counterrevolutionary bureaucracy, occupied Latvia in 1940, following the Stalin-Hitler pact. However, the country was overrun by the German army on July 10, 1941, and by the end of the year the entire Jewish population had been slaughtered, as well as any potential opponents of the Nazi regime. Over 100,000 Latvians died as conscripts in both armies, while the population as a whole declined by 300,000—25 percent. Stalin deported thousands more in the aftermath of the war.

In the postwar period, Latvia was largely integrated into the planned economy of the Soviet Union, its industry geared to military production while the country was itself a military base. Living standards stabilised and improved to among the highest in the Soviet Union. At the same time, and very much part of the ideological confusion produced and encouraged by Stalinism, a new Latvian nationalism emerged. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country’s entire political elite set about filling their pockets with the remains of the planned economy, while promoting Latvian nationalism and anti-Russian chauvinism as a cover for their operations.

The advanced conditions won in Sweden are inexplicable if viewed as primarily Swedish events and can only be understood in the context of the revolutionary struggles that culminated in the formation of the Soviet Union. Although national struggles

played their part, the much vaunted “Swedish model” of welfare capitalism was primarily a means through which the bourgeoisie attempted, with the assistance of social democracy and the trade union bureaucracy, to prevent the spread of revolutionary movements in Sweden and the rest of Europe.

You care nothing for the real history of the Latvian working class or the suffering imposed on them by Stalinism and imperialism. You would even deny Latvian workers the basic right to move in search of improved living standards. As is so often the case, a supposed nationally based defence of the working class ends up with calls for immigration controls and other reactionary measures.

In contrast, the socialist programme we advance speaks to all sections of the working class. The planet’s working population is being objectively unified in a vast network of production. Working people of all nationalities, religious backgrounds and political views, in all corners of the globe, are being drawn into identical relationships with capital. Increasingly workers across several continents work for the same employer, or its subcontractors. Workers can communicate instantly with their peers and co-workers globally.

Our view is that the guiding principle to which the world economy is directed must be that of social need, not the expansion of private wealth. This can only be achieved by replacing the profit system, through a conscious political struggle of the international working class.

In Europe, a relatively small but immensely productive area jammed with 45 or so nation states, many more languages, a vastly complicated history, and a powerful working class, the only political form through which capitalism, its state instruments and transnational institutions such as the EU can be replaced is through a united socialist Europe under the political rule and democratic control of working people.

This is why we insist that Swedish and Latvian workers, and workers in every country, have common interests, and must unify their political struggles on a socialist basis. Without this becoming the essential axis for the political and social struggles of working people everywhere there is no way forward, only further setbacks and defeats.

Sincerely,  
Steve James



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