

Opposition in Sweden presents election program

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The centre-left opposition in Sweden has presented a joint election manifesto ahead of the September 19 vote. The document confirms that the Red-Green coalition, made up of the Social Democrats, the Left Party and the Greens, has no fundamental differences with the right-wing Alliance government.

The opposition has accepted entirely the budgetary framework put forward by the Alliance, which aims to restrain public spending in the coming period. Although Sweden's budget deficit is one of the few in Europe currently below the 3 percent of gross domestic product target set by the European Union, both political blocs support fiscal discipline. As Social Democratic leader Mona Sahlin observed, "It is not there that the differences are."

The very title of their election programme, "Responsibility for the Whole of Sweden," parallels the Alliance's "A Sweden Which Sticks Together," the underlying message being that it is necessary for everyone to pull together and bear the cost of the economic crisis.

As with other recent elections internationally, talk of the global capitalist crisis has been kept to a minimum. Instead, the Red-Green programme focuses on various state initiatives to support families, offer tax breaks to employers, and tackle youth unemployment. Not even such limited measures will be possible if, as seems ever more likely, the European and world economy plunges deeper into recession.

Sweden's economy depends to a considerable extent on exports to other European countries, and its financial system is no less bound up with global processes. This was clearly demonstrated in the crisis that gripped many leading financial institutions last year, triggered by investments made in the Baltic countries which entered a sharp recession. Only through a multibillion-

euro programme of guarantees was the government able to prevent the collapse of a major bank.

The only reference to the economic crisis by the Alliance has been their attempt to use it as an illustration of their "responsibility" in government. Finance Minister Anders Borg and other leading ministers have pointed to a budget deficit of just over 2 percent as proof of this.

Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, in his speech to launch the Alliance's election campaign, pledged that 20 billion kronor (€2 billion) of tax cuts will be enacted by the next parliament if the right-wing coalition holds onto power. Borg followed with the announcement that the privatisation drive largely abandoned when the economic crisis began would be re-started.

Such low levels of state debt have been achieved by attacks on the working class. Unemployment is twice the level of 2006 when the Alliance took power, with young people particularly affected.

Notwithstanding rhetoric from Sahlin and the Red-Greens on their determination to deal with the high rate of joblessness amongst youth, the opposition is in no position to offer anything to working people. From the origins of the coalition at the end of 2008, the Red-Greens have sought at every stage to reassure the ruling elite that it will form a "responsible" government if it wins the election.

The timing of the coalition's founding was politically significant. The agreement which formed the basis for the collaboration between the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Left Party was signed in December of 2008, just months after the world financial meltdown. In the months prior to the agreement, the Social Democrats had announced that they would seek increased cooperation with the Greens, whilst excluding the Left Party due to differences on

economic policy. (See “Sweden: Left Party seeks coalition with Social Democrats”)

The move served to pressure the Left Party into acceding to the demand that it support an independent central bank and accept the need for fiscal austerity. Party leader Lars Ohly made clear in a number of statements that his organisation was willing to do this, and it was therefore no surprise that a deal was reached soon afterwards.

The agreement reflected fears within ruling circles that a new mechanism would be required to implement the kind of budget cuts they wanted to impose. The Left Party and Greens were encouraged to form a coalition with the social democrats in order to provide a left cover for austerity measures, which, in spite of Sweden’s present relative economic stability, will be imposed the moment economic conditions worsen.

In pushing for close cooperation, the three parties were following the example of the right-wing Alliance, which had been formed in 2004 with the aim of taking power from then-Prime Minister and Social Democratic leader Göran Pärsson. Party leader Reinfeldt, who is now prime minister in the four-party coalition, brought together the Liberal, Centre and Christian Democratic parties in a coalition that has sought to push forward with the largest privatisation drive in Swedish history, whilst at the same time cutting government spending for public services and local authorities.

The Red-Greens will not deviate fundamentally from this course if they take power after September 19. Many of the headline measures in their manifesto are presented with the conditions “should economic conditions permit,” meaning that promises can easily be junked after the vote in the event of a deterioration of the economy.

But the prospect of the centre-left coalition winning power is looking increasingly unlikely. Recent polls have seen the three-party bloc fall as much as 4 points behind the Alliance, a reflection of the alienation felt by working people from the major parties. In 2008, the combined support for the Social Democrats, Greens and Left Party had been as much as 20 percent above the Alliance, and remained in double digits for most of the year. With the onset of the economic crisis, support for the Social Democrats in particular has plummeted, from over 45 percent in September 2008 to less than 30 percent today.

Although some polls point to an absolute majority for the Alliance, most have them falling short by a percentage point or two. In the event this is translated into votes on election day, Reinfeldt may be forced to rely on the far-right Sweden Democrats for a parliamentary majority. The Sweden Democrats are continuing to poll just over the 4 percent threshold for representation, meaning they could hold seats in parliament for the first time.

An anti-immigrant party containing neo-fascist elements, the Sweden Democrats have sought to shift the blame for budget cuts onto the Muslim population. In an election advert banned by TV station TV4, the party portrayed a hobbling pensioner with Muslim women in burqas rushing past him to grab money from the state. The advert declared, “On September 19, you can choose to cut money from immigration budgets, or from pensions.”



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