

Rioting hits Stockholm after police shoot Portuguese immigrant

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Rioting has occurred nightly in the suburbs of Stockholm, the Swedish capital, since last Sunday. As of Friday night, police had arrested 29 people and were calling in reinforcements from Gothenburg and Malmö, the second- and third-largest cities in Sweden, respectively.

The riots were touched off by the police killing of a 69-year-old Portuguese immigrant, who moved to Sweden over 30 years ago and whose name has not yet been made public.

According to an interview in Swedish tabloid *Aftonbladet* with Risto Kajanto, the deceased man's brother-in-law, the man and his wife had been out eating at a restaurant and were confronted by a gang of youths on their way home. The man went back to his apartment and reportedly went onto his balcony and waved a knife at the youths, who left after a while.

At some point later, the police arrived, and the couple, believing they were the gang of youth, refused to open their door. Although the wife reportedly told police that she was not in danger, they nevertheless stormed the apartment, shooting and killing her husband in front of her.

"That was what my sister told me. But she is in a state of shock," said Risto.

Later that night, youth in Husby, the northwestern suburb of Stockholm where the shooting took place, set fire to cars and threw stones at police. Over the next five nights, rioting spread to other poorer areas in western and southern Stockholm, resulting in the burning of over 300 cars and one police station and rapid calls for police reinforcements.

This is now the third time that riots have struck Sweden in the last five years. In 2008, hundreds of youth fought with police after the closing of a mosque in the southern town of Malmö, and in 2010 youth set

fire to a police station in Rinkeby, another Stockholm suburb.

The events in Stockholm further undermine the lie that the "Scandinavian" model has somehow insulated Northern Europe from the crisis of global capitalism. On the contrary, the systemic economic and social crisis and the massive growth in inequality is giving rise to irrepressible and explosive social tensions.

For his part, Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, of the right-wing Moderate Party, has responded to the police killing and the ensuing riots by denouncing the youth: "We have groups of young men who think they can and should change society with violence. Let's be clear: this is not okay. We cannot be ruled by violence."

In fact, like similar riots in 2005 in France and 2011 in Britain, the Stockholm riots reflect both the increasingly desperate conditions facing immigrants and youth in Europe and the imperviousness of the political system to the needs of the working class.

In recent decades, the Social Democratic Party, which had dominated Swedish politics in the postwar period, has sought to privatize state assets, deregulate the economy, and dismantle the welfare state. Its support has collapsed to historic lows. It has been backed, both in its right-wing social policies and in its support for overseas wars by pseudo-left forces, including the Green Party and the Left Party. Both in and out of government, the Left Party and Greens have been willing to collaborate fully with the Social Democrats and their right-wing policies, as shown by their backing of the government of Göran Persson prior to 2006, and their agreement to fight the 2010 election on a joint platform when in opposition.

In 2011, these parties supported Reinfeldt's coalition government's participation in the imperialist war in

Libya, in which it supplied NATO with eight Swedish fighter jets.

In this reactionary political climate, the state has moved to inflame racial tensions and anti-immigrant sentiment. Allegations already emerged earlier this year of police specifically targeting dark-skinned youth for identity checks on subways.

During the current rioting, local organizations in Stockholm reported that police have been calling youth in the area “tramps,” “monkeys,” “apes” and “negroes.”

Many of Sweden’s immigrants are fleeing home countries torn apart by imperialist wars; nearly 50 percent of Sweden’s 43,900 asylum seekers in 2012 were from Somalia, Syria and Afghanistan.

In Sweden, the unemployment rate for immigrants, at 16 percent, is almost three times the national average.

The economic position of native Swedish workers and youth has also grown increasingly precarious since the onset of the global recession and European debt crisis. The overall unemployment rate for youth aged 15 to 24 stood at over 25.1 percent, up from 22.2 percent a year ago.

Although the current rioting began in the poor and predominantly immigrant suburb of Husby, Stockholm police spokesman Kjell Lindgren said that it has since spread to parts of the city not primarily inhabited by immigrants.

He told the BBC, “My colleagues say the people on the streets are a mixture of every kind of people you can think of. We have got Swedes, we have got very young people, we have got people aged 30 to 35.”

The participation of wider layers of the population in the riots, including native Swedes, reflects the increasingly bitter tensions within Swedish society. Social inequality has been growing rapidly in Sweden since the 1990s.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), although there is as yet little “absolute” poverty, the gap between rich and poor is growing faster in Sweden than in any other major country. Between 1995 and 2010, Sweden dropped 14 spots in the ranking of income equality.

Perhaps even more startling than the growth in income inequality has been the surge in overall wealth inequality. As of 2007, the top 1 percent of Swedish households controlled 29 percent of the country’s

wealth, and the top 10 percent of households controlled 72 percent of the country’s wealth.



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