Trade unions urge anti-immigrant measures following Swedish riots

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The riots that gripped Stockholm in Sweden last month are being exploited to launch attacks on immigrants and all those living on welfare benefits, as part of a campaign to intensify labour market reforms.

The violence, which only subsided after seven consecutive nights, saw clashes with police on the capital's streets and the burning of cars and public buildings. Anger erupted after the police shot dead a Portuguese immigrant earlier in the month. Over the course of the week, riots spread to Malmo, Sweden's second largest city.

The riots were driven by frustration among mainly young people at the desperate economic outlook they face. Although Sweden has been hailed for its relative economic resilience in the face of the European crisis, the latest figures show that the economy grew by just 0.6 percent in the last quarter. At over 23 percent, youth unemployment is more than three times the national average, and there are more than 77,000 16- to 29-year-olds who have not been in education or employment in the past two years. In some of the suburbs where the violence took place, overall joblessness is twice the national average and youth unemployment is above 40 percent.

In response to the disturbances, the trade unions have launched a nationalist campaign, urging the right-wing Conservative government of Frederick Reinfeld to impose restrictions on immigration in certain economic areas. The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) complained that more than two thirds of work permits issued to people from non-Nordic countries were related to economic areas where there was already high domestic labour competition.

Commenting on a report that proposed immigration restrictions in economic areas such as construction and hospitality, union spokesman Thord Ingesson stated to *Dagens Nyheter*, "We are not saying that the unions should have some kind of veto. But we think giving permits should be based on some kind of list from the employment agency that shows in which areas employers are having problems finding people."

Such positions echo those of the far-right Sweden Democrats, who have stepped up their calls for a further clampdown on immigration to the country. The current right-wing coalition government has itself imposed several restrictions on immigration numbers since coming to power in 2006.

Employers' organisations have strongly opposed the introduction of stricter controls on migrant workers, since the increased number of immigrants has enabled firms to drive down labour costs through increased competition. As Karin Ekenger of the Confederation of Swedish Industry put it, "We are a small country in a globalised world, and thus strongly dependent on both the free trade and open borders. Labour migration, therefore, makes it possible for Swedish companies to compete in the global arena."

Ruling circles have nonetheless expressed concerns about the potential for the rapid spread of social unrest under conditions where the deepening economic crisis is imposing widespread joblessness and growing social inequality across the continent. Several commentators drew parallels with the riots in Britain in 2011, which spread from London to Birmingham and Manchester, and saw a massive clampdown by the police and an expansion of the repressive powers of the state.

Just days after the riots in Sweden, the European Union (EU) released statistics showing that average youth unemployment across the euro zone rose above 24 percent. At the launch of an EU strategy ostensibly to tackle the problem, German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble warned that without taking action,

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the EU "will lose the battle for Europe's unity."

The programme the EU set forth has nothing to do with creating decent-paying, secure jobs for the continent's youth. Instead, through labour market reforms, workers' wages and working conditions are to be driven down to increase competitiveness within Europe to levels existing in India and China. The jobs to be created for the younger generation will see the spread of poverty wages, which will lead to a sharpening of class conflict.

Sweden will not be exempt from this strategy. In an opinion piece responding to the riots in the *Wall Street Journal*, entitled "Sweden's real equality problem", Fredrik Segerfeldt wrote, "The biggest hindrance to assimilating foreigners has ironically been Sweden's dogged attempts to maintain absolute economic equality, and at very high rates. By sector-wide union agreements, the country has higher de facto minimum wages than most of its peers, and so boasts fewer low-wage entry-level jobs than any other EU member."

He went on to urge that labour costs be slashed in order to increase competitiveness. "Too many of them (immigrants) have been priced out of a labor market that caters only to the skilled. They're receiving benefits that are still way too generous, but their human capital and productivity can't measure up," he argued. "Stockholm's best hope to avoid similar events in future would be to let income gaps widen, not force them narrower."

By scapegoating immigrants, this is precisely the scenario being facilitated by the trade unions. They divide the working class, and the employers rule the roost by pitting each against all.

Notwithstanding the clear link between expanding social inequality and the outburst of rage seen in Sweden, politicians have also sought to deny that there is a connection between these two developments. Reinfeld put the violence down to "hooligans", while Kjell Lindgren, a spokesman for the Stockholm police, claimed that "there is no answer" to the cause of the riots.

In fact, the violence is a direct product of policies embraced by the entire political establishment over an extended period to undermine public services, slash labour costs and vastly expand the influence of the private sector in all areas of economic and social life. Many of these policies, including attacks on public education and the undermining of social welfare programmes, were begun under the Social Democrat-led government of Göran Persson, which enjoyed the backing of the Greens and Left Party. This process has been intensified by the right-wing Alliance, especially in the aftermath of a multibillion-krona bailout of Sweden's banks in 2008.

The sustained onslaught against the living standards of working people has created the miserable conditions of life in many of the suburbs like Husby and Rinkiby on Stockholm's outskirts where the violence was at its worst. The levels of inequality that have opened up between these suburbs and richer areas are so stark that an Organisation for Economic Co-operation report identified Sweden as the country with the fastest growth in social inequality over the past decade.

Megafonen, a campaign group set up by local residents in Husby, has documented numerous cases of police brutality towards the mainly immigrant population, with stop-and-search procedures an almost daily occurrence. One member told the Berlin-based *TAZ* newspaper, "Just look at what is going on here every day. Sixteen-year-olds are now used to being stopped by a police patrol and searched for drugs on their way to football training."

Another member commented, "I am white, and have myself been denounced from police as a 'rat.' Many young people report insults like 'monkey,' and 'nigger.' They are always talking about their readiness for dialogue, but where is that when they approach us at the same time with shields, batons and dogs?"

There have been long-running allegations of racism within the police. Earlier this year, a scandal broke when it was revealed that police were using racial profiling tactics to stop commuters on the Stockholm underground and ask for identification. The "REVA" programme was aimed at locating "illegal immigrants", and was initiated by the government. Police were told to approach "foreign-looking" people in an attempt to increase deportation rates.

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