

Bernie Sanders and the “Scandinavian model”

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Asked during a recent Democratic Party candidates’ debate in Nevada what he meant by socialism, self-proclaimed “democratic socialist” presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders responded by citing the example of the Scandinavian countries.

The Vermont senator stated, “When I talk about democratic socialist, I’m not looking at Venezuela. I’m not looking at Cuba. I’m looking at countries like Denmark and Sweden...”

Sanders has attracted significant support among sections of workers and young people, a sign of the initial stage of the political radicalization of the American and international working class. But the invocation of Denmark and Sweden by Sanders is yet another example of just how fraudulent his “socialist” rhetoric is.

The two Scandinavian countries of Denmark and Sweden have occupied something of a hallowed place among “progressive” circles in Europe and North America for several decades. These societies, so the argument goes, allegedly show what can be achieved if capitalism is humanised and its worst excesses controlled by state regulation, high taxes on the wealthy, and relatively generous social services and welfare provisions.

In truth, the exact opposite is the case. For a period of time in the 20th century, particularly in the immediate post-World War II era, the working class extracted certain concessions from the ruling class, which embraced Keynesian economic policies of national state regulation and co-management structures established between the trade union bureaucracy and employers’ organisations. The reforms went further than most in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. Nonetheless, they were not alms handed down from on high by far-sighted politicians, but were wrenched from the bourgeoisie by means of class struggle, the highest point of which was the victory of the Russian Revolution in 1917.

From the 1930s onwards, Sweden was dominated for decades by the Social Democrats. Responding to militant strikes by the working class—which included open clashes in 1931 when state forces fired on striking workers, resulting in five deaths—the Social Democrats instituted welfare reforms and established a national health care system.

Following the Second World War, during which the Swedish bourgeoisie maintained “neutral” status in large measure by supplying the German war machine with raw materials, the Social Democrats and trade unions implemented a co-management system. National collective agreements served to guarantee a steady and uninterrupted supply of labour to the capitalists, who reinvested much of their profits into economic activity. In exchange, workers were granted substantial wage increases, relatively generous sick leave and maternity benefits and pensions. One study of Sweden’s labour

relations model, carried out by the International Institute for Labour Studies in 1998, summed up the character of the relationship between employers and the unions during the decades immediately after the war when it noted: “The parties live together in something like a marriage of convenience with no possibility of divorce.”

All of the Nordic countries, in which similar conditions prevailed to one degree or another, were staunch allies of US imperialism throughout this entire period. Norway, Denmark and Iceland were founding members of NATO. Notwithstanding its publicly-cultivated image of neutrality during the post-war period, Sweden served as a critical source of US intelligence operations against the Soviet Union, as was confirmed by documents released by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013. The Scandinavian countries supplied a disproportionately high number of diplomats and other functionaries to serve pro-imperialist institutions such as the United Nations.

The Nordic nations proved no less susceptible to global economic shifts than any other country. From the 1980s on, as the globalisation of production undermined all national reformist programmes and the bourgeoisie launched its counteroffensive led by US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, successive Swedish governments began rolling back public services and welfare provisions. The ruling elite, increasingly dependent on the global economy for the sale of its products and for financial speculation, no longer had an interest in the maintenance of the nationally-regulated labour relations system which had dominated since the war.

From the 1990s, Social Democratic governments took the lead in the destruction of public services, with the full collaboration of the trade unions. In Sweden, the Social Democratic government, which came to power in the aftermath of the Nordic banking crisis of the early 1990s, held office from 1994 to 2006 and oversaw large scale privatisations in education and health care, along with welfare spending cuts. Its right-wing record helped pave the way for the conservative Alliance government under Moderate Party Prime Minister Frederick Reinfeldt, which launched the largest privatisation drive in Swedish history when it came into office.

In Denmark, Social Democracy likewise swung sharply rightward. The government of Poul Nyrup Rasmussen in the 1990s imposed cuts on welfare spending and pushed for Danish adoption of the euro, which served as a mechanism across the continent for lowering wages and workers’ living standards. When this government was voted out of office in 2001, having lost a referendum on the euro, the Social Democrats embraced the right-wing policies of the Anders Fogh Rasmussen Venster government, which relied on the far right, nationalist Danish People’s Party (DF) for support. This government implemented the strictest immigration system in Europe and supported

the US-led imperialist war in Iraq.

Over the past two decades, Sweden has abandoned all traces of its former neutrality. It sent fighter jets to Libya in 2011 as part of the US-led coalition that toppled the Gaddafi regime, and seized on the Ukraine crisis, which was triggered by a fascist-led coup in Kiev sponsored by Washington and Berlin, to massively increase defence spending and integrate itself into the US-led war drive against Russia along with its Nordic neighbours (See, “Nordic countries sign defence cooperation agreement aimed at Russia”). Earlier this year, a senior Swedish army general warned the country could be at war in a matter of years.

Sweden has also played a critical role in the US-led witch hunt of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who exposed some of the worst crimes of US imperialism in its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The dramatic swing to the right in Scandinavia has found an enthusiastic response among leading representatives of the global financial elite. In their 2014 book, *The Fourth Revolution: The Global Race to Reinvent the State*, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, former editors of the free market Economist magazine, applauded Sweden as model for the future. The authors, whose explicitly right-wing political orientation is made clear by their contention that the assault waged on the working class by Thatcher and Reagan did not go far enough, wrote, “The streets of Stockholm are awash with the blood of sacred cows. The local think tanks are overflowing with fresh ideas about welfare entrepreneurs and lean management. Indeed, Sweden has done most of the things that politicians know they ought to do but seldom have the courage to attempt.”

The twin policies of attacks on the working class at home and war abroad have resulted in increasingly polarised societies in both Sweden and Denmark. Sweden has seen one of the fastest increases in social inequality among OECD countries in recent years, while a 2014 study revealed that the top 1 percent in Denmark own almost a third of the total wealth.

Unemployment and poverty are even more pronounced among immigrant populations. In Sweden, where some suburbs of Malmö and Stockholm have jobless rates up to twice the national average, social anger exploded in the summer of 2013 in riots after a police officer shot a Portuguese immigrant. The trade unions responded by stoking nationalist sentiment with calls on the government to restrict the import of migrant labour.

Across the border in Denmark, the most brutal immigration system in Europe has been established. In January, the Danish parliament passed a law permitting border guards to confiscate the personal belongings of refugees worth more than 10,000 kroner (€1,340), a measure that recalls the darkest period of European history. Since then, allegations have been made that guards are confiscating mobile telephones from refugees and refusing to return them for weeks on security grounds.

The actions of the Social Democrats and trade unions has played directly into the hands of the far right, which is gaining in popularity in both countries. The Danish People’s Party emerged from last year’s Danish elections as the second largest party based on appeals to anti-immigrant chauvinism and Danish nationalism. The Sweden Democrats, a party with explicitly fascist origins, is trending at around 20 percent in the polls following the climate of fear whipped up over refugees by all of the established parties, led by the current Social Democrat-Green government of Stefan Löfven.

Sanders’ citing of Sweden and Denmark as examples of

“democratic socialism” thus reveals perhaps more than the Vermont Senator intended. He has made clear throughout his campaign that he fully endorses the United States’ imperialist foreign policy, including its wars in the Middle East, while promoting a nationalist domestic economic policy. Under conditions of a deepening global capitalist crisis, the right-wing, anti-working class nature of such a programme is demonstrated by what is happening in the Scandinavian countries. All that needs to be added is that the reactionary forces of militarism, anti-immigrant chauvinism and police state repression would emerge many times stronger in the US under a Sanders presidency than they have in either Sweden or Denmark, which are minor players in comparison to the world’s strongest imperialist power.

The ability of the Sanders campaign to cite Sweden and Denmark as progressive beacons has been assisted by his pseudo-left cheerleaders, who have weighed in to provide such claims with a “socialist” cover.

Typical was an article in the International Socialist Organisation’s (ISO) socialistworker.org web site entitled, “Socialism: you mean like in Sweden.” It praised Sanders for appealing to the “virtues of Scandinavian social democracy” as a “breath of fresh air.” “Scandinavian Social Democracy has many benefits for working class people,” the authors continued, “and it would represent a massive advance for workers in the U.S. to win even a fraction of the reforms at its core.”

The reality is that the temporary concessions won by workers in Scandinavia during the 20th century were made possible by exceptional economic and political conditions: the fear of socialist revolution among the bourgeoisie following the October revolution and militant struggles by the working class, combined with a US-financed restabilisation of global capitalism after World War II thanks to the Stalinist betrayals of working class movements, which made possible certain national reformist measures.

Any illusion that similar reforms can be achieved today will prove fatal. Under conditions of the deepest capitalist crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, all attempts to provide the profit system with a progressive colouration serve only to facilitate the drive towards austerity and war.



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