

Swedish student protest halts deportation of Afghan man

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A video of a student in Sweden halting the deportation of an Afghan man has gone viral, having been viewed by more than two million people. It reveals a broad wave of revulsion at the treatment of refugees.

Elin Ersson, a 21-year-old social work student at the University of Gothenburg, has been volunteering with refugee groups for around a year. A group of activists heard that a young Afghan man was going to be deported on Monday and bought a ticket for his flight from Gothenburg to Istanbul. Ersson went with the young man's family to the airport, where they spoke to passengers explaining what was happening.

It was not until Ersson boarded that she realised the young man was not on the flight. However, "there were rumours going around" that immigration officials were moving other people for deportation, including an older Afghan man. Ersson realised that the 52-year-old was at the back of the plane. She approached him, speaking to him briefly before his security detail pushed her away.

Ersson began filming on her phone and livestreaming the footage to Facebook "in case something happened to me, and ... to make sure that other people knew what was going on." It was only thanks to her footage that the family of the young man whose deportation she had gone to halt learned he was not on that flight.

With a great deal of personal courage, Ersson then refused to take her seat and switch off her phone, thus preventing the plane's departure. Cabin crew described her as "unruly" and asked her repeatedly to sit down or leave the flight. She remained on her feet, telling crew and other passengers, "I'm not going to sit down until this person is off the plane."

Filming only her own face, as other passengers did not want to be filmed, she explained her opposition to

Swedish deportation policy saying, "I'm doing what I can to save a person's life." There was some hostility to her. A British man took her phone and said, "You're upsetting all the people down there. I don't care what you think." A flight attendant returned her phone to her.

Another passenger said, "You're preventing all these passengers going to their destination." Ersson responded, "But they're not going to die, he's going to die."

Despite some initial frustration and hostility, however, there was a broader wave of support. Ersson has spoken of the encouragement she felt when a Turkish passenger "started talking to me and making sure that I knew I wasn't alone ... He was saying what I was doing was right." She was applauded by other passengers. A man three rows away stood up with her, as did an entire football team.

Ersson and the young man's family had discussed the question of deportations with the footballers in the airport. She said afterwards that knowing they were supportive and knowing "I had people supporting the idea of me standing up" had strengthened her resolve. As the video shows, their support on the plane was an emotional moment for Ersson.

After 15 minutes, the Afghan man was removed from the plane by the rear exit, although Ersson could not see this for the other people standing to watch. She was then removed at the front of the plane. She was still unable to see the Afghan man, but heard crew saying he was on the tarmac. "I heard them speaking with each other and it really sounded like his deportation was cancelled," she said. "It felt good."

The Swedish Social-Democratic-Green coalition government has been pursuing an increasingly right-wing, anti-immigrant course on asylum policy and

border controls over the last three years. Two years ago, it announced plans to deport 80,000 refugees whose asylum applications had been rejected.

In 2015, 163,000 people, including 35,000 unaccompanied minors, sought refuge in Sweden. Afghans are particularly hard hit by the deportation policy. They make up more than half of refugees, but because Sweden classifies Afghanistan as “safe,” only 28 percent have been granted asylum. As Ersson explained, “It was only one person on this flight today, but there will be more.”

Humanitarian groups have pointed to the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan. In 2017 more than 3,000 civilians were killed, and 7,000 wounded. Ersson, who has been dealing with Afghan asylum seekers over the last year, spoke of the uncertainties in the country, saying that “no one should be deported to Afghanistan because it’s not a safe place.” Afghans, she said, “[D]on’t know if they’re going to live another day.”

The rightward shift of Swedish bourgeois politics has seen an embrace of the far-right anti-immigration party Sweden Democrats (SD), which has links to neo-Nazi groups across Europe, and which has been gaining in recent polls. SD have been an increasingly hostile presence on the streets of Stockholm, marching through mixed suburbs like Bagarmossen and assaulting migrants in the city centre. Ersson told the media, “I’m meeting Nazis on the street every month or so.” She thought they were gaining in strength ahead of the general election in September.

Such has been the right-wing climate created within the Swedish political system that the Sweden Democrats are expected to poll highly or even win the election. A recent poll saw the ultra-right party at over 20 percent, with some polls suggesting it could potentially double its 2014 vote share of 13 percent and 49 seats—after which it became the third largest parliamentary party.

Ersson’s action exposed the realities of Swedish deportation policy. The young man whose deportation she had originally aimed to halt had been taken to Stockholm and put on a flight there. The following day Ersson texted, “This is how deportations in Sweden work. The people involved know nothing and they are not allowed to reach out to their lawyers or family.”

The young man’s family were also unaware of what was happening, as they had gone to Gothenburg airport.

It is probable, too, that the man whose deportation Ersson halted was simply moved to another departure. Ersson herself may yet face legal action, with the possibility of a fine or up to six months in jail.

Sweden’s increasingly aggressive policy against refugees and migrants is going hand-in-hand with similar moves across Europe. Earlier this month, German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer greeted the largest mass deportation of refugees to Afghanistan with the words, “Precisely on my 69th birthday, 69 people—I didn’t plan it that way—were returned to Afghanistan. This is far above the usual number.”

One of that group, a 23-year-old man, committed suicide in a shelter shortly after his deportation to Kabul.

Ersson said that she hopes people viewing her video “start questioning how their country treats refugees.” Her actions are not just the courageous actions of one person. The reason Ersson’s actions struck a chord is because her sentiments, hostile to the nationalist anti-immigrant climate being fostered by the existing political set-up, are broadly supported by a leftward-shifting population.

Neither is this an individual question, but requires a mobilisation of workers internationally to organise protests and strikes against police attacks on immigrants and refugees. Workers must organise independent action committees and defence squads as part of a movement of the international working class to abolish the capitalist nation-state system.



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