

Social Democrats and ex-Stalinists lead Finland and Sweden into NATO

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Finland and Sweden's application for membership of the NATO military alliance was carried out in close collaboration with the major imperialist powers, who view the integration of the Scandinavian countries as crucial to the opening of a second front in their war to subjugate Russia.

Contrary to the claim that Helsinki and Stockholm went from "neutral to NATO" overnight in response to Russia's reactionary invasion of Ukraine, their membership in the Western military alliance, like the war itself, was prepared in a behind-the-scenes conspiracy over many years. Putin's invasion of Ukraine served merely as a pretext to trigger plans for NATO expansion drafted long before February 24, 2022.

The formalities surrounding Helsinki and Stockholm's NATO membership remain to be finalized, with Turkey refusing to provide the unanimous consent required to start the membership procedure due to concerns over the two countries' support for Kurdish nationalist groups. However, since Helsinki and Stockholm filed their formal applications in mid-May, US imperialism has moved to create "facts on the ground" to make the Scandinavian countries de facto alliance members. General Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Stockholm this month with a US battleship to coincide with Sweden's hosting of the BaltOps 22 military exercise, a NATO provocation against Russia in the Baltic Sea involving 45 maritime units, 75 aircraft, and 7,000 military personnel that began June 5 and runs to June 17. Last week, Finland announced the initiation of plans to construct barriers along its 1,300-kilometre border with Russia, citing the threat of "hybrid warfare" from Russia sending migrants into the country.

The most significant political role in turning Finland and Sweden into frontline states in NATO's war with Russia has been played by the Social Democrats and pseudo-left parties, who owed much of their substantial support throughout the 20th century to their professed opposition to militarism and war. They have emerged as the leading warmongers and are playing a critical role in suppressing the significant popular scepticism that remains among the population to NATO.

Both the Finnish and Swedish governments are currently led by Social Democratic parties. Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin and Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson are the leaders of their countries' Social Democrat parties. Marin heads a five-party coalition that includes the Green League and ex-Stalinist Left Alliance, while Andersson governs in a minority administration tolerated in parliament by Sweden's Greens and ex-Stalinist Left Party.

From opponents of militarism to NATO war hawks

Sweden's Social Democrats went further than other social democratic parties in Western Europe in granting concessions to the working class

during the 1950s and 1960s. These gains, including relatively generous wage increases and extensive social services, were part of a policy supported by Sweden's ruling elite that sought to regulate the class struggle through a system of national collective bargaining and union/corporate co-management. It was made possible by Sweden's neutrality during World War II, which left much of its key industrial and manufacturing sectors intact while its European competitors lay in ruins.

More fundamentally, Sweden's economic development depended upon the temporary stabilisation of world capitalism in the post-war era made possible by the betrayal of the revolutionary working-class struggles that erupted after the war by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the ability of the United States, the preeminent imperialist power, to underwrite the revival of the capitalist system.

The Social Democrats were associated in popular consciousness with free health care and education, generous social welfare support, and free childcare, which created a society—the Folkhemmet (People's Home)—that stood in stark contrast to the grinding poverty experienced by masses of Swedish workers just two generations earlier at the beginning of the 20th century. The Social Democrats also owed their popularity to a strong stand, at least in public, against military violence and repression, whether employed by American imperialism or the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

In 1968, Education Minister Olof Palme, who would become Swedish Prime Minister one year later, joined a demonstration against the Vietnam war in Stockholm with North Vietnam's ambassador to Moscow. In a famous speech, Palme declared, "Democracy is an exacting system of government. It demands respect for others. One cannot foist a system of government upon a nation from the outside. The people must have the right to decide over their own destiny. It therefore presupposes the national right of self-determination. Democracy demands justice. One cannot win a people by filling the pockets of those who are already rich while the poor are driven into ever deeper distress. One cannot meet the demand for social justice by violence and military power."

Washington responded by recalling its ambassador from Stockholm for consultations. Later in 1968, Palme condemned the deployment of Soviet troops to Czechoslovakia by the Stalinist bureaucracy to crush the Prague Spring.

In another speech broadcast on national radio in December 1972, shortly after the Social Democrat government officially recognised North Vietnam, Palme compared the US bombing of Hanoi to the crimes of Hitler's Nazis. "(T)he bombings are an atrocity," he declared. "And of this we have many examples in modern history. They are generally connected with a single name: Guernica, Oradour, Babi Yar, Katyn, Lidice, Sharpeville, Treblinka... Now another name is added to the row: Hanoi, Christmas 1972."

Palme and the Social Democrats' opposition to US imperialist aggression was not of a principled character. The Social Democrats pursued a policy of military "non-alignment," which Swedish ruling

circles broadly supported. Maintaining Stockholm's distance from both Cold War blocs enabled Sweden to serve as a key conduit for intelligence gathering operations against the Soviet Union by the imperialist powers, with whom Sweden struck an intelligence sharing agreement as early as 1954. It enabled Swedish businesses and diplomats to establish contacts with developing countries and national liberation movements deemed a "communist" threat by US imperialism and its allies. Sweden thus assumed a disproportionate role on the global stage given the relatively small size of the country, which became known as a "humanitarian superpower."

The Social Democrats' public criticisms of American imperialist violence secured them substantial popular support. Palme remained prime minister until 1976, concluding more than four decades of continuous Social Democrat rule. His assassination in murky circumstances in February 1986, by which time he had been prime minister again for over four years, expressed growing social and political tensions tearing Swedish society apart as the post-war era of capitalist stability gave way to mounting crises.

Finnish Social Democracy and Stalinism in the post-war era

Although the domination of social democracy in Finland was less pronounced, the Social Democrats were the largest party throughout most of the post-war era. They generally polled around 25 percent of the vote and played an important role in developing Helsinki's neutral foreign policy during the Cold War.

The Stalinist Communist Party of Finland (SKP) also played a prominent role in official politics. One of the largest Stalinist parties west of the Iron Curtain, the SKP entered the government after the end of World War II to stabilise Finnish capitalism. It was intimately involved in the negotiations of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union in 1948 guaranteeing the continuation of a market economy in Finland and stipulated Helsinki's neutral status in world affairs. The treaty obligated Helsinki to pay reparations to the Soviet Union for its participation on the side of the Nazis in the war of extermination against the USSR and required Finland to resist any attack by "Germany and its allies," a formulation widely interpreted to mean the Western powers, on the Soviet Union carried out via Finnish territory. SKP member Mauno Pekkala attended the treaty signing ceremony in Moscow in April 1948 as Finland's prime minister.

The Finnish People's Democratic League (SKDL), an electoral alliance dominated by the Stalinists, remained outside the government from 1948 to 1966 polling around 20 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, it participated in several Social Democrat-led governments. In 1990, with Gorbachev's programme of capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union in full swing, the SKDL transformed itself into the Left Alliance, which now holds two ministerial posts in Marin's pro-NATO government.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union

The Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism in Russia and throughout Eastern Europe fundamentally changed the political and geostrategic framework on which Finnish and Swedish "neutrality" rested. Almost immediately after the end of the USSR, both Scandinavian countries took steps to subordinate their foreign

policies more directly to American and European imperialism. Finland renegotiated its 1948 treaty with Russia in 1992 to allow it more freedom to participate in Western alliances. Three years later, Finland and Sweden joined the European Union.

Social Democrats were prominent in deepening Sweden and Finland's relationships with the major imperialist powers, beginning with their joining of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PFP) in 1994. The PFP served as a mechanism to integrate 13 countries from the former Soviet sphere of influence into NATO and strengthen cooperation with Ukraine.

Maartti Ahtisaari, Finland's president from 1994 to 2000, emerged as one of the most outspoken Social Democrats in favour of NATO membership. Ahtisaari, the lead European Union negotiator seeking Serbia's surrender in June 1999 during NATO's ongoing savage bombardment of Belgrade, commented in 2014, "Finland should have been in all of those international organisations to which Western democracies belong long ago. That includes NATO."

Under the Social Democrat-led government of Göran Persson, Sweden formally abandoned its foreign policy neutrality in early 2002. This coincided with the dispatch of Swedish troops to support NATO occupation forces in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Swedish warplanes would subsequently join NATO's savage bombardment of Libya, which claimed the lives of tens of thousands and plunged the country into a civil war that continues to this day.

The Western-backed Maidan coup of 2014, spearheaded by fascist forces that led to the overthrow of pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in Kiev, was seized on in Scandinavia to legitimise a major military build-up. Citing Russia's annexation of Crimea, a response to the establishment of a pro-Western regime in Kiev that persecuted Russian-speaking Ukrainians, Sweden initiated a massive increase in defence spending. Finland and Sweden both became "enhanced opportunity partners" through NATO's Partnership Interoperability Initiative, launched at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales allowing partners to join exercises and adopt NATO standards. Ukraine was another "enhanced opportunity partner."

The Social Democrat-led government of Stefan Löfven, whose parliamentary majority depended on support from the Greens and Left Party, signed a Nordic defence agreement with Finland, and NATO members Denmark, Norway, and Iceland in 2015. In 2017, Helsinki and Stockholm joined the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), a British-led alliance of Baltic and Nordic NATO members aimed explicitly at confronting Russia.

The US-NATO war with Russia and the rush to join NATO

This history makes clear the absurdity of media reports claiming that Finland and Sweden performed a U-turn in their foreign policy following Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Stockholm and Helsinki's plans to join NATO were long in the works and merely awaited a pretext to be implemented.

Finland and Sweden were intimately involved in the series of NATO provocations that led up to Putin's invasions. Their militaries participated in NATO-led exercises with Ukraine in the Black Sea and in the Baltic region. In December 2021, the same month that the Biden administration rejected Russia's appeal for negotiations over security guarantees, Finland finalised a deal with Washington to purchase 64 F-35 fighter jets from Lockheed Martin. The deal, which equates to a country the size of Germany purchasing over 900 fighter jets, was the largest military purchase in Finnish history.

Immediately following Russia's invasion, Sweden and Finland rapidly

swung into all-out war mode. The Social Democrats gained near unanimous support in the Swedish parliament on February 28 to send weaponry and military equipment to Ukraine, the first time Sweden had officially sent weapons to a country at war since the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1939.

The decision saw the ex-Stalinist Left Party fully embracing the war fever. At a meeting of the party leadership on February 27, the party initially took a decision to oppose supplying weapons to Ukraine. But after five deputies broke ranks in parliament the following day and backed the weapons transfer, a second leadership meeting on March 1 reversed the Left Party's position from two days earlier opposing the supply of weapons to Ukraine.

Left Party leader Nooshi Dadgostar all but declared her support for NATO membership in a nationalist outburst later in March. "My position is that we are more safe in Sweden if we are outside of any military alliance," she stated. "But it is important that we have broad agreement. That we do this together as one people and one nation. I don't often agree with Carl Bildt [a former conservative prime minister and long-standing advocate of NATO membership], but on this question I do. There's the left-wing and there's the right-wing, but the Swedish military is all Swedes together."

The Finnish pseudo-left behaved in an equally venal manner. Having claimed in June 2019 during talks on joining the Social Democrat-led government that it would do so on condition that Finland would not join NATO during the government's term in office, the Left Alliance embraced Finland's NATO application. Notwithstanding the Left Alliance's formal opposition to NATO, party leader Li Andersson declared in early May that if the government in which she occupies the position of education minister filed an application to join NATO, she would not see this as a reason to resign her post. "The Left Alliance used to be quite unanimous on this issue, but there are now two distinct camps within the party and many are unsure of their position," Andersson declared following a meeting of the party leadership on May 7.

Andersson received the backing of a joint meeting of the party council and parliamentary group, which voted by 52 votes to 10 to remain in the government if a NATO membership application was filed. The Left Alliance's "opposition" to NATO was on paper only. Andersson made this explicit on May 12, declaring her support for a NATO application.

Three days later, an overwhelming vote in favour of NATO membership took place at the Social Democrats' national council, with 53 out of the 60 members present voting to join the alliance. Speaking to parliament May 17, Prime Minister Marin declared, "Our security environment has fundamentally changed."

The transformation of Finland and Sweden into frontline garrison states in the US-NATO war with Russia by the very political forces who claimed for decades that it was possible to remain outside of great power rivalries and reform capitalism into a more peaceful and "fair" society is a political lesson for working people internationally. The deepening crisis of world capitalism, expressed in the danger of world war, the growth of social inequality, and a deadly pandemic that has killed millions, leaves no part of the world untouched. Political fantasies based on national parochialism and piecemeal reforms, which "progressives" around the world justified with reference to the "Swedish model," have been proven bankrupt.

To oppose war and the mounting social crisis, workers in Sweden, Finland, and throughout Scandinavia cannot harken back to the days of Social Democratic "neutrality" in foreign policy and social compromise domestically. The temporary post-war restabilisation of capitalism and balance of forces between the major powers that made these policies possible have long since disappeared. What is required is the construction of a mass anti-war movement based on a new political orientation: the unification of the working class in Sweden and Finland with their class

brothers and sisters throughout Europe and around the world on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme. This struggle necessitates the establishment of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout the Scandinavian region.



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