

A EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

The frustration of reformist socialism

By Eva Björklund*

The 20th century witnessed the failure of two anti-capitalist projects in Europe: revolutionary socialism and reformist socialism. Despite all the differences in their internal and external circumstances, practice and theories, they shared one key element: a lack of real, participative and labour democracy.

The predominant rhetoric usually presents this in another way: that the essential difference was that one was anti-democratic while the other was democratic. In terms of liberal democracy that is correct. But without underestimating the universal value of the civil rights and freedoms encompassed by liberal democracy, we have to consider their limitations. Formally, equal civil rights and freedoms for all is the upside of liberal democracy. The lack of real opportunities to exercise these rights and freedoms and the restricted range of democratic action, which excludes the means of production, is the downside. This is inherent in the capitalist system for which it is designed and defined as procedure, not as essence or result. Democracy as people's power based on popular participation and equality of opportunity, encompassing society as a whole, is incompatible with the logic of capitalism.

Swedish socialist reformism was also based on this analysis of liberal democracy and it proposed the building of socialist democracy in three steps:

- First, political democracy (the right to vote, parliamentarism);
- Next, social democracy (the right to a decent life, employment, social security, education, health care and culture);
- Finally, economic democracy (people's power over the means of production).

THE WELFARE STATE

The welfare state and a Keynesian economy were the policies commonly adopted in most Western European countries after the Second World War, irrespective of whether the governing parties belonged to the right or the left. What makes Sweden a singular case is that, with a social democratic party in government for almost 80 years, it achieved the most advanced industrial and social development. Despite this, Sweden today is becoming more and more "normal", like any other rich western society, with a downsized public sector and growing inequalities. Sweden now also belongs to the imperialist European Union and the level of support for the Social Democratic Party is at its lowest ebb since the First World War.

THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC WORKERS PARTY

The Social Democratic Party in Sweden was founded in 1889, organized by the trade unions as an instrument for changing society. In 1917, six months before the Bolshevik revolution, the reformist majority expelled the more radical minority, which later founded the party that was to become the Swedish Communist Party, today the Left Party.

Up to today social democracy has had its support base principally among the working class, the traditional industrial workers and the rank-and-file personnel in the public sector, i.e., women. The party's programme used to have a Marxist perspective and expressed the goal of building a classless society, with power over the means of production in the hands of the people. However, a few years ago, in the latest revision of the programme, this goal was abandoned.

Historically the Communist Party has had a rather limited representation in parliament, only approximately 5 per cent, although sometimes it was around 10 per cent. Generally the Social Democratic Party ignored the Left, until the elections of 1998, when the social democrats lost 4–5 per cent to the Left Party, which grew to 12 per cent. Since then the social democrats have needed the Left to assure the majority required to govern.

THE SWEDISH MODEL

One characteristic of Swedish society is that financial and industrial capital is heavily centralized and well organized. The Swedish Employers' Confederation, has played a more important political role than the bourgeois political parties.

The trade union movement is also very well organized. It is still unique in western societies, with a level of unionisation above 80 per cent. The leaders of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, have always occupied important positions within the Social Democratic Party. As a norm, the general secretary of LO has been an MP and a member of the executive committee of that party.

It was during the 1930s that the trade union movement and the private companies developed the forms of collaboration typical of the Swedish model. The agreements signed at that time characterize a whole era of collaboration, determined by the shared ambition of the trade unions and the private companies to resolve problems through negotiations and contracts.

For more than 30 years the results were favourable for both parties. Both were also favoured since Sweden, from its privileged position without war damages, could take advantage of a continuous international economic bonanza after the Second World War that lasted until the late 1960s.

In this way, the financial and industrial capitalist class allowed for the creation of the welfare state, understanding the advantages of a well-educated and healthy working class, while the government did not threaten the corporations' dictatorial right to control production. There existed a political hegemony that favoured the working class, but that simultaneously allowed the enrichment of Swedish corporations, so that they could expand into transnationals and participate in the exploitation of the third world.

Another characteristic of the Swedish model is the policy of generalized welfare for all citizens, financed through progressive taxes in such a way that everybody contributes, to some degree according to their ability. The state and the municipalities organize and administer the social security structures. This is also the case with education and health care, health insurance, the old age pension system, maternity leave, childcare etc.

A third characteristic is the alliances forged between the Social Democratic Party, the trade unions and national private companies. During the 1950s the norm was established of inviting important sectors of society to resolve problems through informal talks. Through this

corporatist approach, private companies, trade unions, farmers and the cooperative movement, among other players, participated in policymaking.

ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY THREATENED CAPITALIST POWER – THE BEGINNING OF THE DISMANTLING OF THE MODEL

During the 1960s, the model was challenged from the left because of the radicalisation of young people – awakened by the war against Vietnam – and of workers. Educated within an ideology of equality and solidarity, they accepted neither authoritarian leadership nor that democracy was shut out from their workplaces. In terms of the concept of three phases in the building of democracy, economic democracy was still to be achieved.

The trade unions put forward crucial demands: first to have a share of influence in the workplaces, and then to construct wage funds from which the unions were to receive a share of the profits and, as co-owners, to exercise certain powers over private companies. This implied a rupture in the consensus that had existed between unions and corporations for decades.

The owners of major capital sat up and took notice. They created panic amongst small businesses and succeeded in massively mobilizing their owners onto the streets. The social democratic leadership yielded and has never again dared to question private control of corporate capital. So later, when neo-liberal globalisation was imposed, there was virtually no resistance.

This shift in ideological hegemony expresses a shift in the balance of power between capital and labour, and involves a major offensive by private big business. Their action took place within the framework of an international offensive to open up new areas that had previously been closed to private capital and profit, for example, the Eastern European countries, the public sectors of the West, as well as some Third World countries where post-war conquests still prevailed.

MASS MEDIA AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The Labour Movement had started its own newspapers and magazines, and after the Second World War it had one national morning paper and one evening paper, and a daily newspaper at least in all the provincial capitals. Yet these publications were unable to compete successfully with the liberal press in raising income from paid advertisements.

The Social Democratic Party, or actually the Trade Union Confederation, which was the wealthier of the two, had to cover the deficit, and did so for some time, well aware of the importance of a proper voice in the formation of public opinion and in the strengthening of the self-esteem of the working class *per se*. With the media reliant on paid advertisements, unequal competition slowly strangled those newspapers that objected to the policies of the advertisers.

As the provincial or municipal social democratic newspaper was seldom the dominating one, the parliament – in the name of free speech – passed a law to subsidise the minor newspapers and thereby reduce the financial burden of the Labour Movement. Despite this, the social democratic newspapers could not withstand the neo-liberal avalanche and during the 1980s and 1990s almost all closed down or had to merge with other papers. That is why today, when almost 90 per cent of the daily media is bourgeois, the state subsidies intended to secure

plurality in the media end up in the pockets of the owners of private media corporations, an example as good as any of the difficulty of taming commercial forces.

The almost total liberal domination of the press from the 1990s and onwards was followed by a similar trend in the two public service television channels, which compete with three commercial national and countless international channels. The same is also true for public service radio.

Despite the fact that we basically only have one single media voice claiming that neo-liberalism is the only way forward, the majority of Swedes refuse to succumb. Opinion polls show that between 60 and 70 per cent prefer to maintain social security, education and health care as public services financed on the principle of solidarity. That is why the bourgeoisie cannot do without a chorus of mass media charged with the task of convincing people to vote against their own interests, or as Chomsky says, to “manufacture consent in favour of the interests of the large corporations”.

THE GAP BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND MOVEMENT

When the neo-liberal wave came, the strongest trade union movement in the capitalist world should have been able to stop it. Yet the opposite happened. Huge protests took place in Germany and France, but not in Sweden. Here, loyalty to the Social Democratic Party contributed to silence criticism within as well as outside the trade unions.

The Social Democratic Party, after 75 years in power, did not oppose the neo-liberal policies, in spite of the obvious public opinion against neo-liberalism. The party had become independent of its members. The parties in the parliament had awarded themselves state financing and therefore did not need to rely on membership fees anymore.

During the 1990s, the political parties in Sweden together lost 30,000 members a year. If this trend continues they will have no members left around the year 2012/2013. Over 65 per cent of the population consider that the parties do not fulfil their basic tasks. This is similar to numbers in Latin America, revealing a deep-seated lack of trust in the traditional political party system.

The leading social democrats let themselves be entranced by the siren songs of New Labour and Tony Blair, the “third way” and the “renovation of Social Democracy”. They proclaimed that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we all have to accept capitalism, liberal democracy and globalisation as the goal of history.

Subcomandante Marcos was the one who, in the most straightforward manner, indicated that the third way’s social democracy is a mortal sin for the left, and that it can serve to open the door to neo-fascism. In Austria, a party of the extreme right displaced Social and Christian democracy, channelling the people’s sense of frustration over the consensus on neo-liberal policies. In Italy, Berlusconi defeated the Olive Alliance (centre-left). In Denmark, the liberal right won in alliance with a xenophobic party. In Sweden, the Liberal Party made itself a mouthpiece for similar tendencies.

THE EUROPEAN UNION – A NEO-LIBERAL PROJECT

Only through spending large sums of money and exerting extensive blackmail was the social democratic leadership, together with the bourgeois parties, able to obtain a weak 51 percent in favour of Sweden's entry into the European Union in 1994. In the 2002 referendum regarding Sweden's entry into the Economic and Monetary Union, they lost, despite the striking asymmetry in campaign financing and access to mass media. It was not possible to cover up the obvious results of neo-liberal policies in all fields, with unemployment, higher costs and poorer services.

Today, when the question is whether or not to accept the new EU-constitution, the bourgeois and social democratic parties are determined not to permit a referendum, which they realistically fear they are likely to lose.

Sweden is a liberal democracy. The EU doesn't even fulfil those requirements. Led by a social democracy that has lost its soul and its compass, we in Sweden are in danger of losing what we have up till now called democracy, our national sovereignty and our constitution.

The Swedish model was developed as a reformist alternative to the Soviet model. In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union accelerated the demise of this alternative.

THE PEOPLE HAVE SAID "BASTA" AND HAVE STARTED TO MOVE, AGAIN

At more or less the same time, in the years around the new millennium, a new movement arose in many parts of the world, a massive resistance against neo-liberal globalisation. New forms and constellations now again take up the words that many of the old left had ceased to pronounce, and they resist the transformation of the earth, its water, human labour and all human life into merchandise. They proclaim that politics must involve mobilisation, organisation and participation.

With the offensive expansion of capital, almost every effort to stop it leads to direct confrontation, and furthermore direct confrontation with international capital. Therefore it has also become more evident that the dividing line between the revolutionary and the reformist left is no longer valid. Reformism has to be revolutionary and vice versa. Reforms have to strengthen the people and undermine the foundations of the capitalist system in order to achieve the goal of building a new society, based on solidarity, equality and harmony with nature. That is why, more than ever in the epoch of globalisation, social movements and parties must be internationalist. #

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