



Political crisis in Sweden: Strike action is the way forward

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Ever since a general election in September 2018 produced a hung parliament, Sweden has limped from one near-crisis to the next. It took until January 2019, to form a coalition government of Social Democrats and Greens, with parliamentary support from the Centre and Liberal parties and even then it was a minority in the Riksdag.

The alternative could have been a right wing coalition including the far right, racist Sweden Democrats. To avoid that, the Social Democrats and Greens were prepared to accept key measures from the Centre and Liberal programmes. At the time, *The Economist* noted that the "January Agreement" included, "Eight proposals, such as the abolition of profit restrictions in the private welfare sector and of an extra income tax for high earners, [that] are in direct contradiction with the [Social Democrat] manifesto."

Among the eight measures were two that went to the heart of Social Democratic tradition: marketisation of rents, and an attack on the Employment Protection Act (LAS), a key piece of legislation dating from the 70s. Even with the Agreement, the government did not have a parliamentary majority, so all eyes turned to the Left Party and its leader, Jonas Sjöstedt, who had (rightly) characterised the Agreement as a step towards increasing inequality and more attacks on working class rights and conditions. Left Party members and voters took to social media to urge on their leadership to "push the red button," that is, reject the new government and the neo-liberal Agreement.

As one Left Party member, former MP Daniel Sestrajcic, representing the left-wing Malmö district, wrote, "If the Social Democrats want to purge the party of what is left of social democracy, and embrace their own Pasokification, that is their own, sad choice. For the Left Party, there's only one button to push: the red one."

The Liberal and Centre parties, recognising the potential key role of the Left Party, insisted that the Agreement contain a clause that the government would not allow it to have any influence over its political direction. After receiving a "secret note" from the Social Democrat PM, Stefan Löfven, that this clause was now obsolete (how?) the Left Party announced that it would abstain on the vote to form the government, ensuring it, therefore, passed. To sugar the pill of such a humiliating climbdown, Sjöstedt claimed that, if the government crossed either of two "red lines", marketisation of rents or legal attacks on job security, they would vote to depose Stefan Löfven.

As Arbetarmakt, Swedish section of the League for the Fifth International, wrote at the time, that threat should have been taken with a large pinch of salt. For decades, the long-term strategy of the Left Party has been to be included in a government coalition with the Social Democrats, thereby securing a "left-wing influence" in the administration of the bourgeois state.

The Left Party justified its support for a rightward moving coalition as the "lesser evil" as compared to a right wing coalition including the Sweden Democrats. Of course, preventing their gaining any role in government is laudable, any socialist would agree, but keeping them out of government is the real goal and that needs a long term strategy. Propping up a government that is committed to attacking employment rights and "marketising", in other words, raising, housing costs, will inevitably increase precisely the conditions in which the Sweden Democrats can flourish.

In leaks published around that time, Social Democrat insiders spoke of their biggest fear: that a more militant Left Party

would split off parts of the LO, the main trade union confederation, and 'establish themselves as a big, left-wing socialist party'. Any genuine socialist party should have done everything in their power, we wrote, to do exactly that. With that attitude, they could then have gone strengthened into a possible new election period, not winning the respect of Stefan Löfven, but appealing to somewhere far from the offices and apartments of the MPs 'to the workers and poor of the country, to everyone threatened by right-wing and racist policies.

The natural slogans would have been: No support for the January Agreement or for the bourgeois Löfven government based upon it! All openly bourgeois parties out of government! No influence for the Sweden Democrats! Bring down all bourgeois proposals 'bring down the government!

Instead, the Left Party MPs settled for a threat of a no confidence vote against Löfven at a later point, should he cross their 'red lines', and they abstained in the decisive vote on government. In later leaks, it turned out part of the deal agreed behind closed doors was for the LO chair, a Social Democrat stalwart, to speak at Left Party conferences, along with other symbolic crumbs given to the Left Party as a reward for not standing in the way of the new government.

The nearly two years since have seen the Social Democrat/Green government stalling for time over some of the proposals of the January Agreement. They are faced with threats from both sides; from the right, if their Liberal supporters in parliament, dissatisfied with lack of progress, switch to their erstwhile Alliance partners in the Christian Democrats and Conservatives and, from the LO and the Tenants' Association, two constituent parts of the social democratic workers' movement, should they actually try to implement the proposals.

As for the plan to marketise rents, the government has attempted to bury the proposal in a committee, probably hoping that the issue will go away. For their part, the leadership of the 538,000 strong Tenants' Association, which negotiates rents in collective bargaining agreements, has felt forced by the pressure of its membership to launch a campaign against the proposal, calling for demonstrations and petitioning against it. In the Gothenburg area especially, more radical forces have rightly pushed further, organising protests not only against this proposal in particular but against the whole, rotten January Agreement in itself.

The LAS conflict

According to the Agreement, the procedure for dealing with proposed attacks on the Employment Security Act (LAS), would be for a parliamentary committee to publish a report, and then for negotiations to take place on the basis of that report between the trade unions and the employers' organisation, the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. The results of that negotiation would then be made law by the government. However, as a key condition, should a compromise not be reached between the labour market forces, the matter would revert back to the government to resolve by law.

Clearly, this gave the employers' organisation a great advantage: should the trade unions resist too far-reaching attacks, the employers would only have to lean back and let the government implement the changes for them instead.

The condition was beneficial for PM Löfven and the Social Democratic leadership as well. If they could pressure the LO leadership into agreeing to the attacks, the planned changes to the law, originally a Liberal and Centre party invention, would instead be magically turned into a proposal from the trade unions themselves.

Once the committee presented its report, even PM Löfven admitted the proposals were 'heavily slanted' in favour of the employers, acting as if this was a surprise, given the initiator of the changes to the law, and the instructions to the committee. In other words, the capitalists couldn't have asked for a better result.

Two key proposals in the report were for employers to be allowed to freely choose to exempt five workers, instead of two, from the regular rule, first in, last out, of terminations, and to repeal the current right of employees in smaller companies to invalidate an unfair dismissal in court. As trade union militant Daria Bogdanska said in an interview with Arbetarmakt, the proposals in the report were clearly intended as just a start of more attacks, and would make it 'much, much easier for employers to fire employees out of hand, even in the case of minor conflict, insubordination or simply by making up a reason in order to get rid of, for example, trade union activists'.

The first round of negotiations...

While the LO leadership can be considered to be part and parcel of the Social Democratic party apparatus (until 1990, LO members were automatically members of the Social Democratic party, and the LO chair still holds a seat in the Social Democratic executive committee), the trade union leadership still has a membership to consider, trapped as they are in their role of mediating the economic class struggle.

Even before the LAS negotiations, we could see the beginning of a fracturing of the LO, with a number of trade unions, including the 500,000 strong Kommunal, the biggest LO member, organising municipal and healthcare workers, rebelling and breaking with the federation's coordination in the run-up to the yearly collective bargaining agreement negotiations.

These cracks in the bureaucracy were widening even before the start of the negotiations, with a frenzied activity within the LO leadership in order to secure a deal and thereby save face for the government. Already, in December of 2019, the trade union press could reveal how a small group of Social Democrat loyalists within the LO executive actively worked alongside the employers' organisation in order to prepare a deal, secretly agreeing with them on a letter of intent in the run-up to negotiations. The scandalous letter, which was kept out of sight of more critical trade unions, such as Kommunal, made clear that these bureaucrats were already prepared to give the employers the right to dismiss any employee, at will, even before any negotiations.

In a motion to the LO congress, Kommunal and Seko [the Union of Service and Communication Employees] unions declared that they no longer had any confidence in the TUC negotiating on the issue, with Byggnads [Building Workers' Union] declaring that their confidence in the same was 'damaged'. The professional employee federation, TCO, saw similar protests, with teachers' and nurses' unions, among others, threatening to withdraw their confidence in the negotiation committee.

However, the critics were unsuccessful in stopping the negotiations, which went ahead, with the first round starting in June. By then, the LO part of the negotiation committee had declared their willingness to make 'large concessions', that is, betrayals of their membership.

Even so, the TUC heads weren't prepared to go quite as far as the now confident representatives of Swedish capitalism demanded, and negotiations broke down. Yet again, the proposal was brought back to government. Once more, the pressure was on the Left Party, in something of a political game of chicken. Would they withdraw their threat, now that it could actually bring down the government? Would Löfven be able to pressure LO to reopen negotiations? Or could he convince the Liberal and Centre parties to accept defeat on the proposal?

The Left Party, for their part, interpreted their "red line" threat to mean that LAS must not be changed by law and against the will of the trade unions. As the incoming Left Party chair, Nooshi Dadgostar, said, they preferred new negotiations but, without the threat of a change by law, which, they argued, was nullified by the Left Party's threat to bring down the government should it come to that. The Left Party wanted, Dadgostar explained, to give PM Löfven "more time" (to force the parties to renew negotiations) and for them to then "resolve the issue".

What the Left Party leadership didn't explain, however, was exactly what the parties were supposed to negotiate about. What was to be "resolved"? Even if the threat of changing the law in parliament could be regarded as taken out of the equation (which was not certain), it would only take the matter back to a situation where the trade unions would be forced by the January Agreement to negotiate about attacks on employment security.

While the Left Party stalled for time, the Social Democratic party, and their allies in the trade union bureaucracy, acted. They prepared a second round of negotiations, to forestall a vote of no confidence in parliament, whether that was initiated by the Left Party, or by the opportunistic right-wing opposition, who openly declare their intention of implementing the same savage attacks should they come to power, even if they brought the government down on the issue.

... and the second round

As soon as negotiations broke down, LO representatives met again, secretly, with their counterparts, in order to discuss resuming negotiations. As the trade union press reported, this time even the LO executive committee was kept out of the loop, with leaders of critical unions not informed until a proposal for resumed negotiations was reached.

Knowing that several of the TUC unions had pledged their opposition in particular to the question of altering the allowed terms for dismissal, the pro-deal bureaucrats called the rest of the executive to a meeting only after having prepared new negotiations ? ?like a bolt from the blue?, as the Building Workers? Union chair commented. The Building Workers? Union then registered their reservation against resumed negotiations with ?a gun to our head?, along with the Painters? Union, Service and Communications Workers? Union, Building Maintenance Workers? Union, Paper Workers? Union and the Transport Workers Union.

New negotiations were opened anyway, clearly stemming from the wish of parts of the LO executive to save the Social Democratic government and appease the Liberal and Centre parties. As one union head said to the trade union press, the pro-deal representatives ?obviously took the government and the Social Democrats into account? in what another union head dubbed ?the worst kind of dirty tricks?.

Even after this considerable effort by the pro-deal bureaucracy, however, the negotiation committee was unable to agree to the attacks proposed by the employers? representatives and, on October 15, the second round of negotiations broke down. In the end, the entire LO executive rejected the second deal. However, this time, the negotiating delegation of the professional employee trade union federations shamefully appeared at a press conference with the chair of the employers? organisation and said they ?regretted? the TUC rejection of the deal and declared their preparedness to go ahead with a deal of their own. Here, the TCO bureaucrats declared their willingness to throw the LO workers under the bus ? a betrayal which must be condemned.

Back to parliament

Now, the government is once again in a bind. While PM Löfven has declared that the widely detested committee report on LAS is now invalidated, the Social Democratic leadership are unsure of how to proceed. Löfven is hinting at yet another committee, this time based on the deal accepted only by the professional employees? union federation and with the attacks on employment security rejected by the LO. Hopefully, for Löfven, this would then lead to a third round of negotiations, in which the LO would somehow be convinced to rubber-stamp the attacks. In other words, the threats against employment security are still very real.

Meanwhile, for the Left Party, what was implicit in January 2019 is now articulated more clearly. The party now appears more openly as an external (in practice, excluded) but loyal part of the government?s support base in parliament. Their main consideration remains keeping Löfven in power, holding out for the lofty ambition of positioning themselves as reliable and worthy coalition junior partners for a future Social Democratic government. At the first real tests of their famous ?red lines?, the party leadership showed their loyalty was to the interests of the Social Democratic bureaucracy.

The Left Party?s long-term strategy means that, in the end, they are also unwilling to contest Social Democratic hegemony over the trade union and wider workers? movement. They are unable to stake a claim to the vacuum left by the Social Democratic retreat from some strongholds without openly challenging them. Löfven knows that the Left Party of today is a purely parliamentary construction. With just their MPs lending force to their words, without a movement in the workplaces, in the trade unions or on the streets backing them, a new election would be just as perilous for the Left Party as for the Social Democrats.

Besides a vote of no confidence, one can speculate on a number of other ways out of the crisis for the government but, as of now, none of them look very likely. The Liberal and Centre party could not easily back down from their demands to ?reform? employment security. The Left Party could bring down the government, but with nothing else changing, a blue/brown Moderate/Christian Democrat/Sweden Democrat would probably be next, and that would surely want to attack working class rights and conditions much like the current one is pledged to do.

Even if Löfven did deny the Liberal and Centre parties their changes in the LAS law, they could not easily reform their old alliance with the Moderates and Christian Democrats to form a new government, since those parties have now moved in a decisively conservative and right-wing direction and are busy laying the groundwork for an alliance with the Sweden Democrats.

Solution on which terms?

As the LO leadership correctly points out, the negotiations, and the January Agreement proposal which gave rise to them, are really about more than just changes to LAS. Instead, LO compares the process to that of developing a new Saltsjöbaden agreement (in reference to the historic 1938 treaty, which heralded the 'Swedish model' for the labour market and regulated the principles of the official, economic class struggle). The attacks on LAS should therefore be seen as the start of an escalating dismantling of all traditional working class rights in Sweden.

When the January Agreement mentions "flexibility", that is code for something that represents not only a return to the early 20th century labour market, with day labour and very weak protection for the working class, but also something new, in terms of how IT technology makes capitalist production itself less dependent on fixed (and for the working class 'safe?') structures for wage labour that characterised the labour market of the 20th century, and thus the trade union strategy in the Swedish model. Gone is the time when an LO union could simply register new employees in factory X as members on their first working day and then sit back and collect dues for 40 years, while calmly negotiating collective bargaining agreements.

Facing such a reworking of the labour market, which is already in full swing, the question becomes not only one of defensive struggle, but also one of a completely different type of trade union movement, which is prepared to confront new forms of capitalist exploitation and oppression. The question is not just whether the trade union and workers' movement leadership can defend reforms already won, but whether they can ensure that this transition is resolved on the terms of the working class, rather than capital. The LAS battle is a litmus test for how all involved parties will take on that challenge.

The tactical manoeuvres of the Social Democrat leadership clearly show that they prioritise staying in power over a principled defence of the rights of the working class. And the Left Party leadership's inaction (at best) shows that they are unable or unwilling to fight the government. Of the other parties in the Riksdag, the openly bourgeois ones, we can, of course, expect nothing but continued attacks in order for them to safeguard their clients' profits.

The LO leadership's methods against the recalcitrant union leaderships that have, so far, resisted the attacks, show that they can't be trusted for a long-term defence, let alone that they would be willing to go on the offensive. Nor can TCO union members expect anything of their negotiating delegation, which the pathetic display of their leader after the second negotiation round, side by side with the employers, underlined. The solution for workers of all unions, who now face attacks against their employment security, is therefore to fight back, on our own terms.

Fighting back

Since December 2019, a workers' petition is circulating in the trade union movement, in defence of employment security, on the initiative of the trade union at the Volvo truck factory in Umeå. All trade unionists should try, with renewed strength, to table it in their union branch. Adopt and spread the union/workers' petition!

But a petition can only be the first step of the defence struggle. The bureaucrats in the top echelons of the trade unions often lead their lives under completely different conditions from those of their own members and will, therefore, not offer more resistance than we force them to. The leadership of the LO unions, as well as the leadership of all TCO unions, must be pressured not to enter into any new negotiations on these terms, under a mandate not to strike and where there's already a political agreement on attacking employment security. Negotiations should only be entered on how to improve conditions, not on how much worse things should be. If the LO's foul play to reach a deal and sell out our rights continues, and there is no indication to the contrary, activists in the critical unions must work to ensure that their representatives not only leave the negotiating committee, but also completely break with the LO. Withdraw the rotten mandate of the negotiating committee! No negotiations under the gallows!

In addition to the workers' petition and pressure from the rank and file for a clear no to new negotiations, all workers, trade unionists or not, must also start preparing and organising for political strikes. This demand has also been raised by, for example, the Left Party trade union network and the (Stalinist) Communist Party, but only in the sense of a short-term protest action. That, according to current practice, would not violate the collective agreement mandate not to strike. Such shorter political strikes would be a step in the right direction, but in this serious situation we cannot afford to stay there. We must organise for wildcat strikes and a general political strike to repel the attacks and to strengthen, not weaken, employment security, no matter what the collective agreement says on strikes. Organise for wildcat strikes!

The leaderships of the LO, the TCO, the Social Democrats and the Left Party have been put to the test. When the working class is faced with threats to our rights and the employers' side advances its positions everywhere, the path of compromises and concessions will only lead us into ruin. Since the capitalists never cease their efforts to increase our exploitation, the struggle to defend LAS cannot be restricted by the parliamentary considerations of the reformists, or the consensus within the LO if they sell out our rights. A fightback against the attacks through political strikes, whether they come in the form of a betrayal from the LO or through law, will be the first step to win not only the battle for LAS, but to reorganise the workers' movement under a new leadership that is prepared for future challenges and won't betray the working class.

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