

The riots in Stockholm: a reaction against worsening social conditions and violence.

Jens-Hugo Nyberg Fri, 31/05/2013 - 12:02

Jens-Hugo Nyberg

In the week following 13 May, when rioting broke out in the Stockholm suburb of Husby, and then spread to others, the tabloid press, TV reporters and all manner of political commentators positively swarmed over these areas with a high proportion of residents from an immigrant background. They minutely logged each burned out car and every clash with the police.

The nights of rioting eventually spread to several Stockholm suburbs, as well as - on a smaller scale - to several other Swedish cities. These events were triggered by the shooting to death by armed police, of a 68 year-old man, armed with a knife. Police claimed to have acted in self-defense, and filed a report saying the victim died after being taken away in an ambulance. It soon transpired that this was a lie. No ambulance was summoned and the body was only removed several hours later.

Megafonen ("The Megaphone"), a radical Stockholm organisation for youth in the suburbs, were at the scene, and quickly reported the glaring inconsistencies in the police version of events. Eventually, the police were forced to acknowledge that Megafonen's reports were correct: the police blamed their gross neglect on human error, but their credibility, already low, suffered a further blow, and trust in them fell yet further.

Megafonen has openly called the fatal shooting an execution, and are demanding an independent enquiry into the killing. They organized a protest outside the police station in Tensta a couple of days after the fatal shooting, but the police announced they would carry out only the usual internal investigation. Invariably such in-house enquiries find the officers' action blameless.

On the night of Sunday, May 19, police were yet again called to Husby after reports of disturbances. This time, they say, they were met by youth throwing rocks, and they were forced to deploy additional resources in an attempt to restore order.

Once again residents of Husby tell a radically different version of events. According to them, police launched an all out assault, after just a few stones were thrown at them local youth. They attacked bystanders with batons, and dogs and using racist abuse and a mother trying to persuade her son to return home was bitten by a police dog, further enraging the crowd.

Spokespersons for Megafonen, who arrived at the scene of the initial clashes to try to mediate and resolve it in a peaceful manner, also report being attacked by the police.

Not until much later, when the police had completely lost control of the events, were they willing to pull back their forces temporarily and engage in dialogue with the residents.

Of course, the shooting was only the catalyst. The immigrant-dominated suburbs have a long history of heavy policing, which, as in Husby on that Sunday night, was anything but sensitive.

Low-level disturbances, met with violent police repression, are commonplace, and often involve racist abuse from police before any trouble kicks off. To this must be added, of course, the effects of rising unemployment, increased social inequality, the slashing of benefits, the closing of social facilities for the young, all leading to a general social decay. Some 38 per cent of 20-25 year-olds in Husby are without either a job or a place in further education. Another factor is the deportation of "illegal" immigrants.

Altogether these set the scene for a situation where outbursts of rage are aimed at any representatives of a repressive and hated state apparatus. Another threat to the population of these districts comes from so-called "urban renewal". This turns out not to be improvement of the living conditions and environment of the existing residents but rather an attempt to displace them by market forces?

An encouragement of buy-to-let gentrification is under way, attracting wealthier people who can withstand shock rent rises. There is no concern for where the present population will be driven out. In addition, private landlords, who do little or nothing to improve their decaying properties, are trying to squeeze money out of their tenants.

The riot in Husby should therefore be seen as a reaction against racist police, media lies, violence, poverty, unemployment and no prospect of a job for young people. The real question is not why such an outbreak occurred, but why these events are not more frequent.

The backlash from the right

The response from the right, predictably, has been ferocious. While just about everyone from the Social Democrats and leftwards have felt obliged, even while condemning violence and destruction, to point out the social basis of the riots, to the liberals, and everything to the right of them, this is about violent and criminal individuals.

"Stop blaming society!" has been their message. Some, as in Britain in 2011, have called for evicting the families of those involved in riots - although this position is still too unpopular for the "respectable" bourgeois politicians to defend. Racists and reactionaries have gone wild in the social media, with calls for the police to start target practicing on everyone disobeying, and commonly sporting openly racist "explanations" for violence. Of the established parties, the Sweden Democrats, predictably, have gone furthest in calling for more powers to the police, including calls for a state of emergency, and, of course, blaming the immigrants.

Meanwhile, the Nazi and fascist groups have seen their chance for inciting a "race war". Over the last couple of nights of rioting, they organised vigilante mobs going the rounds in some suburbs, on the prowl for "rioters". In fact, they were simply looking for any immigrant they could find to attack. Luckily, the strength of the Swedish Nazi movement is not what it was 5-10 years ago, so it seems they only gathered 60 or so people at one time, but that is, of course, bad enough. They beat up several people, some quite badly. In response, youth in some suburbs have wisely prepared to defend their areas, and anti-fascists have organised to drive the Nazis away.

Our response

A few things should be pointed out. First: the riots are basically a reaction against police harassment, racism and the lack of jobs or any educational prospects. Commentators have claimed that many of the rioters were just looking for an adventure. Yes, probably in some cases; given a run-down society that

gives them little more rewarding and positive to do and no income to do it with. Alienation from such a society is natural. This alienation in no way contradicts the fact that it is right wing neoliberal policies, deteriorating social conditions and racism that brought the riots about.

It is true, too, that if the Swedish Labour movement, the Social Democrats, the left Party and the trade unions, actually did something to fight for radically improved conditions, jobs for all and to defend and restore the welfare state, the youth of Husby and other suburbs and cities across the country would find a political outlet for their fighting spirit.

Despite the justified anger of the youth who have risen up to confront the forces of the state, it is obvious that the outbreaks have brought negative consequences. Many residents, perhaps no less poor and oppressed than those taking part, view the destruction of communal and ordinary people's property in their areas as just making their situation worse. It is therefore necessary not to adopt a romanticised view of the rioting and to see it as purely an uprising against the state and to conclude: the more, the better. Equally, throwing stones at fire engine and ambulance crews is not positive when it comes to seeking solidarity from other workers.

Nevertheless, we should not distance ourselves from every action that has unwanted consequences.

Real life rebellion against police repression will always be accompanied by disturbances, destruction and violence. Of course, we want it to be as organised as possible, limiting destruction of the cars and property of working class people and communities, but we must stand clearly and unequivocally on the side of those victimised and persecuted by right-wing government policies and the police and media, and acknowledge their right to rebel.

Indeed, we have to argue that we need more, not less, resistance. The best way would be for the workers and youth of these suburbs to form self-defence teams able to stand up to police brutality and force the withdrawal of their squads of riot police. Such organisation could easily restrain genuinely antisocial acts which harm local people.

Following the rules has promised everything and delivered nothing. Where have peaceful protests and one vote every four years led us? A gutted welfare state, job insecurity, increased pace of work (if you have a job) to mass deportations and a formerly Nazi, still racist, party (the Sweden Democrats) in parliament.

The people from the suburbs, like all the unemployed, undocumented workers, the working class and oppressed groups in general, have every right to express their anger. It is necessary only to focus it in the most effective way possible; against the system as a whole and the class which it enriches. This, to be sure, won't happen without things getting broken and people getting upset, But it can be done in ways that can draw the broader masses into the struggle. That's when the anger of the youth can really lead to change.

Finally, we should place the blame for all the ill effects of class society on those who profit from it, the bourgeois politicians, capitalists and their racist police forces. We should demand that the labour movement and the left organise demonstrations to demand:

- riot police squads out of Husby and other suburbs! Support organised self-defence against police attacks and fascist/racist gangs.
- an independent public investigation involving local people into the police actions. Bring to court those who killed the 68 year old man.
- a campaign for jobs, housing, education, social facilities.

- expropriation of the profiteering landlords who raise rents; expropriate their run down houses and demand state investment in re-furbishing them, under the control of committees of tenants and local workers.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/riots-stockholm-reaction-against-worsening-social-conditions-and-violence>