



# As Sweden and Finland join NATO: The end of Nordic "neutrality"?

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has meant an all-out barrage of pro-Western imperialist propaganda in Western Europe. The warmongering and heightened aggression between the imperialist blocs has given the ruling classes here opportunities to shift balances in favour of U.S. imperialism and rearmament, with one major shift being Sweden and Finland rapidly applying for membership to NATO. How did this happen, and what does the resistance look like? Arbetarmakt, Swedish section of the League for the Fifth International, recently hosted a public meeting called No to imperialism, no to NATO! After the meeting, we spoke to the Arbetarmakt comrades about the developments there.

GAM: For decades, Sweden and Finland have been outside of NATO. Why is that?

AM: Indeed, the idea of neutrality in international conflicts and in relation to power blocs has been a strong part of the Swedish (and Finnish) self-image for decades. While the geopolitical situation in Finland was much different during the 20th century, with the shared border with the Soviet Union, the strategy of Swedish imperialism was to publicly navigate between the U.S. and Stalinist bloc, with the benefits of not being tied down to either one in terms of international trade and influence, while in reality, behind closed doors, being squarely on the side of U.S. imperialism. In the 1960s and 1970s, under the influence of increased youth and worker radicalism, especially in opposition to the Vietnam war, the pragmatic position of Swedish social democracy shifted into more open posturing against NATO and U.S. imperial aggression. As historians of public policy have pointed out, this mostly meant that knowledge of the true extent of Swedish co-operation with U.S. military planning was kept to a smaller circle, even within the absolute leadership of government.

GAM: Why and how was the position of formal neutrality given up?

AM: While the supposed Swedish "neutrality" was mostly a sham, and increasingly exposed as such, the idea of Sweden as a neutral country, even as a "humanitarian super power", lingered in the minds of social democratic voters, and in broader layers of the working class, well into our time. This was true even as governments, during the 1990s, slowly but surely brought Sweden more openly into the Western alliance. Significant steps in the erosion of formal Swedish neutrality were membership in Partnership for Peace (1994), EU membership (1995) and, most importantly, the Memorandum of Understanding, approved in parliament in 2016, which meant that the pathway to accepting NATO support in the event of a crisis was opened, as well as allowing NATO forces to carry out exercises on Swedish territory. Important to note is also the Swedish participation in past NATO-led interventions in Afghanistan, Kosovo and Iraq. Publicly, and to the voters, this was all paired with rhetoric about "200 years of peace" (apparently discounting direct Swedish participation in, and/or profiting from, imperialist wars abroad) and on how "neutrality has served Sweden well".

In Sweden, the openly bourgeois parties in parliament have argued for NATO membership, with the Social Democrats, Left Party and Greens opposing it. Importantly, the racist Sweden Democrats, in parliament since 2010, also originally opposed NATO (and the EU), arguing a more isolationist line. This meant that formal military neutrality had a solid majority in parliament, even as it was heavily eroded. As late as at the Social Democratic congress in November of last year, Minister of Defence, Peter Hultqvist, declared that: "there'll be no NATO membership application for as long as we have a Social Democratic government. As long as I'm the Minister of Defence, I will definitely not participate in any such process. That, I can guarantee."

Obviously, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this position quickly started changing. With a never before seen pro-NATO onslaught in bourgeois media, the discussion in Sweden was quickly framed as when, rather than if, Sweden should join NATO. The Social Democrats were initially reluctant, arguing not that a NATO membership would be inherently bad in itself, but that now was not the time to change the Swedish defence doctrine, and so they were already on a slippery slope. Once Finland initiated its NATO process, Swedish social democrats saw fit to keep quiet and let the Finns lead the way. In short, with an election looming in September, the Swedish social democrats were eager for this issue to disappear. They would rather be rid of the last few remnants of 'neutrality' than lose the election on the question of NATO or 'worse' have to fight the issue out with remaining dissenters within their own party and electoral base in an election period. As the war began, the Sweden Democrats, too, quickly dropped their opposition to NATO membership, showing how their supposed 'NATO opposition' had little to do with any anti-imperialism. Thereby, the path was clear for a membership application.

Astonishingly, this rapid turn-around, upending decades of established Swedish military policy, was carried out without the voters, let alone the organised working class, being asked what they thought. In September, a clear majority voted for parties opposing NATO membership. Now, everything changed in weeks. Even within the Social Democrat party, no extra congress was called, members weren't even polled. The decision, in clear conflict with what had been decided at congress only months earlier, was taken at the top level of the party, without any semblance of internal democracy? even as the influential party organisations for women, youth, students and religious social democrats all made their opposition to it public.

GAM: What does the opposition look like?

AM: In Sweden, as the Social Democrats turned, the Greens and Left Party remained formally opposed to NATO. Without a clear, anti-imperialist line, however? where Sweden is also understood as an imperialist country, whether in NATO or not? the two parties quickly buckled under the pressure and instead opted to revise their traditional, supposed opposition to militarism. In March, when the Social Democratic government announced that military spending would be raised to 2 % of the Swedish BNP, the Greens and Left Party both immediately supported it, claiming this huge windfall to the war industry is necessary to 'defend neutrality'? not mentioning how, coincidentally, this increase in spending is also a condition for NATO membership.

The Left Party chair, Nooshi Dadgostar, has called for a referendum, but framed it as a way to give NATO membership a democratic form, not as a way to seriously oppose it. And obviously, that is as much as a referendum held under these circumstances would truly be? a stamp of approval. In addition to the support for rearmament (immediately boosting the stock price and profits of Swedish arms company SAAB), Dadgostar has said that the Left Party demand to 'dissolve NATO?', enshrined in the party programme, is something 'that belongs to a different time' and has even wavered on the party's opposition to the co-operation agreements already in place with NATO.

With much of the radical left in Sweden collapsing into the Left Party over the last decade or so, this leaves a limited space for actual opposition to NATO, so far making it mostly a question for protests and demonstrations in the streets. On May 1, the Arbetarmakt contingent in the demonstrations in Stockholm made the case for 'Revolutionary struggle against imperialism? no to NATO!?', a banner which garnered much attention.

In Finland, the Left Alliance, too, recently changed their previous position on making neutrality a condition for supporting the Social Democratic government, and the party is now split on whether to keep opposing NATO. Party chair Li Andersson has said that the imperialist EU project could be a viable alternative to NATO.

With protests in Sweden continuing, attention has now shifted to Turkey, which is currently blocking Swedish and Finnish membership in the military alliance until the Social Democratic government abides by Erdoğan's demands to cease any support to the Kurdish YPG, resumes full arms exports to Turkey and, bizarrely, extradites Turkish oppositionists living in Sweden to Turkey. This is a first taste of what life is like in the authoritarian, imperialist NATO alliance, and it is essential to pressure the Swedish government to refuse any and all such demands, much as Kurdish and Swedish protesters called for in a protest outside the Social Democratic HQ in Stockholm this past weekend. Other key issues are opposing NATO bases in Sweden and pushing the government to join the prohibition on nuclear arms, a

treaty Sweden initiated but then, incredibly, backed out of, under U.S. pressure.

For Arbetarmakt, there is no need to choose between rearmament for NATO or for Swedish 'neutral' imperialism. We proudly stand on the socialist tradition of Liebknecht's 'not a man, not a penny for this system?'. Even as the NATO application has been submitted, the matter is far from over. As internationalists, we will do our part to raise the question of opposition to all imperialist blocs ' into the election period and beyond that.

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