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Sweden

A kind of victory

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Description:

The general election that was held in Sweden on September 15, 2002 had two main characteristics. First, contrary to the European trend, the incumbent Social Democrats not only did not suffer losses in support, but made substantial gains. Secondly, the question of immigrants as a threat to society was put on the table, thanks to the profound turn to the right made by the Liberal Party.

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Given all the heated arguments between the rightwing opposition and the leftwing parliamentary majority, it is also interesting to note that the parliamentary relations after the election stand exactly as they did before. The big changes have been inside each 'wing', with the collapse of the conservative vote on the right being the most notable.

On the left, it is obvious that most of the working class votes that went from the Social Democrats to the Left Party in 1998 went back again this time.

In the municipal election, held at the same time, the self-proclaimed neo-liberal showpiece, Stockholm municipality and region, was smashed in one blow, as the rightwing was cleared out. This showpiece has involved a massive privatisation of transport, day-care, health, school, housing and street cleaning, to mention just some.

Apparently the rightwing had no idea how deeply unpopular this policy was and the opinion polls also indicated a continuing rightwing rule. However, the ordinary voter remembered what it was like last winter when the street cleaning of snow was privatised and the companies who took over were not paid for taking the snow away, just to put it off the roads. Nor did they forget the hundreds of thousands of commuters that were left stranded because privatised commuter trains were hopeless understaffed and arrived very late or not at all.

A particular feature of the 'showpiece' was the selling off of council flats and the banning of construction of new council housing. Instead, a number of big housing projects have started that cater only for the well off. A four room flat at 350,000 euros plus a monthly fee of around 800 euros will not be considered particularly expensive. With the resounding defeat of the Conservatives, this showroom was effectively cleared out.

The governing Social Democrats broke the trend of defeats that has haunted European social democracy for the last few years. A small but clearly visible step to the left in the last week of the campaign won back the mainly working class votes that went in 1998 to the Left Party. For those who voted for the Left Party in 1998 in order to "turn the Social Democrats to the left", the results were not impressive and why vote for a copy when the original seems to turn left?

The loss of voters from the Left Party should also be seen in relation to the 20% that was the goal for the campaign

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and - according to the party leadership - necessary in order to "turn the Social Democrats to the left".

The extreme-right Swedendemocrats - an attempt by fascists to create a party a la Front National in France - made substantial gains in the elections, not primarily by winning new votes, but through sucking the juice out of several local rightwing groups. They succeeded in situating themselves as the only valid national alternative for the extreme right. This is particularly true in the southern county of Skane, where such groups have been present for a long time.

The Swedendemocrats won two seats in Malmö, the third city in Sweden, four seats in Landskrona, three seats in Helsingborg, just to mention some of the more spectacular results. Nationally they polled more than 70,000 votes (1.5%) and thereby succeeded in getting their ballot paper freely printed and distributed in the next election.

Even a superficial glance at the election shows not only that the number of voters dropped significantly but also that voting - or not voting - are class bound. In the well off areas where the bourgeois parties regularly win 80% plus of the votes, the turnout is well over the national average of 80.1%. In working class areas, the turnout is significantly lower. The poorest areas are also those with the lowest turnout, sometimes as low as between 50 and 60%. And strongholds for the parliamentary left.

The left of the left mainly contested the municipal elections and only in a very few municipalities. Substantial gains were only made by the Committee for a Workers' International group, RS, which took two seats in the northern town of Luleå and three seats in Umeå.

A Stalinist party with some good local results lost two seats, but remain quite strong in two municipalities. For the Socialistiska Partiet (Socialist Party - Swedish section of the Fourth International) there were small advances but no seats except for the one held for a long period in the working class town of Köping. With a meagre 3,200 votes in the parliamentary election, the Socialistiska Partiet became the least small among the small leftwing parties.

Given that the working class as a whole have been pushed out from the centre stage for many years - even the word 'working class' is all but forgotten - and the class struggle is at a very low level, it is significant that the working class vote goes overwhelmingly to the parliamentary left. And as long as the working class does not take action to defend the welfare state or to resist the neo-liberal policies of the Social Democratic government, this has to be regarded as a victory in itself.

Election results - 15 September, 2002

Moderaterna	(Conservative)	15.2%	(-7.2%)
Folkpartiet	(Liberal)	13.3%	(+8.7%)
Kristdemokraterna	(Christian Democrats)	9.1%	(-2.6%)
Centerpartiet	(Agrarian)	6.1%	(+1.1%)
Socialdemokraterna	(Social Democrats)	39.8%	(+3.5%)
Vänsterpartiet	(left Social Democrats)	8.3%	(-3.7%)
Miljöpartiet	(Greens)	4.6%	(+0.1%)

Turnout: 80.1%

Moderaterna is the classical rightwing party, with close ties to the German CDU and the British Conservatives. It has adopted a more outspoken neo-liberal profile, especially during the last 10 years. It suffered the most astonishing collapse of votes ever recorded for a Swedish party.

Folkpartiet, the liberal party, took a step to the right of the Conservatives in this election, copying a number of their demands, mainly on getting tough on school dropouts and immigrants without jobs and on welfare. They hope to copy the vote-winning concepts of the Danish liberals (Venstre) but also Blair's New Labour and Chirac's French right.

Kristdemokraterna has managed to partly take over the role of a classical conservative party, hailing the traditional family, the teaching of 'Christian values' in school and so on, mixed with an anti-gay message.

Centerpartiet, the traditional agrarian party, has for many years been declining from a position as the main party of the parliamentary right, but with a more social democratic touch regarding the welfare state than the classical right. In this year's campaign, the Centerpartiet took the most left wing stance regarding Bush and Blair's war drive. While all the other parties, including the Left party, gave their support to whatever the UN decides to be the appropriate way to deal with Saddam Hussein, the Centerpartiet demanded proof of the existence of the supposed 'weapons of mass destruction' before even considering military action.

Socialdemokraterna had their worst election result ever at the last election - they fell to 36.3%, which says a lot about how strong this party is in Sweden. The party has been in government since 1932 with the exception of the periods 1976-82 and 1991-94.

Vänsterpartiet (Left Party), the ex-Communist Party, can most accurately be described as a left social democratic party today. It has been in the 'parliamentary majority' for the recent period and has been supportive of privatisations like the selling of shares in Telia, the state communications company. The party registered its best results ever in the last election, 1998, with 12% of the vote, mainly from the Social Democrats. It lost almost a third of its vote this time, mainly working class votes and almost entirely through defections back to the Social Democrats.

Miljöpartiet, the Greens, are also part of the 'parliamentary majority' They have a distinct petty bourgeois profile, with the support of small entrepreneurs and so on, but also a clear leftwing stance on international matters. They are a very distant relative of the German Greens.