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Norway

Meltdown for Social Democracy

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The Norwegian elections on September 10th 2001 changed the political landscape in the country.

Election results

Party	Share 2001	Change from 1999
Labour Party	24.4	- 10.6
Socialist Left Party	12.4	+ 6.4
Red Electoral Alliance	1.2	- 0.5
The Center Party	5.6	- 1.3
Christian Democrats	12.5	- 1.3
Liberal Party	3.9	- 0.6
Conservatives	21.2	+ 6.9
Progress Party	14.7	- 0.6
The Coast Party	1.7	-

The Labour party lost more than 10 percentage points compared to the 1997 elections, ending up with only 24.7 per cent. It represents their worst result in the last 80 years! It is a grim irony that before the 1997 election the Labour prime minister had said that if the Labour party got less than 36.9 per cent - the result from the 1993 elections - he would resign.

Labour got only 35 per cent and the Labour government resigned. Then there was two years with a 'Centre' government, composed of the Christian Democrats, the Centre party and the Liberal party. Labour plunged in the opinion polls.

This government lasted two years before it was forced to resign by the Labour party in alliance with the Conservatives and the rightwing populist Progress party over the question of building CO2 emitting natural gas power stations, illustrating grimly the fact that the Labour party has a less green policy than these bourgeois parties.

End of hegemony

Labour has been the governing, hegemonic party since World War II in Norway, having an absolute majority in several Parliaments in the "golden age", the first two decades after the war. There have been right wing intermissions, but the other parties were always small in relation to Labour and could only form unstable coalitions.

The Labour party has always been in government alone, and has participated in no coalition governments since World

War II. In the light of this, a result below 25 per cent is a disaster. In the capital, Oslo, Labour got only 22.5 per cent - their worst result in the capital since 1900. However, in the year 1900 the party was in the process of being built from scratch!

The development of Norwegian social democracy over the last 10-15 years has changed the party from a reformist, welfare state party into a party of the Blairite type. But whereas in Britain the non-proportional voting system and the especially aristocratic and reactionary nature of the Tories keeps ordinary people voting Labour since there are no "real" alternatives, this is not the case in Norway and the other Scandinavian countries.

Due to the proportional voting system, and the more liberal nature of the rightwing parties, Labour is losing voters both to the right and to the left and its hegemonic position is being eroded much more quickly.

Essence

The essence of social democracy is to fight for reforms, to be willing to stand for interventionist policies. However, that is not the case anymore. A Labour party that privatises Statoil, the national Telecom company; slashes support for the poor regions; does nothing to raise the wages of the "educated working class" (teachers, nurses, municipal service workers); and so on, is no longer a social democratic party.

As the historic general secretary of the Labour Party in its golden age put it "To enter the election campaign without any big cause clearly dividing the left from the right is totally hopeless".

This qualitative change in Norwegian social democracy has of course been going on for over ten years and the problem is that workers do not need this party, while the middle class prefer the rather liberal Norwegian Conservatives. As a former Labour Member of Parliament said: "The surprise is not the defeat, but that it has not manifested itself before".

The lack of vision, more concretely the lack of major reforms to the benefit of ordinary people; the lack of willingness to use the enormous oil wealth to repair schools; to increase the "female" wages of teachers and nurses; to support regional development; and so on, opened the door for the rise of the populist right.

One year ago, the populist right (the Progressive Party, sic!) was increasing in support and was almost as big as the Labour party, 25-30 per cent. And not only that: in northern Norway, a stronghold for the Labour Party since the war, the populists had a real breakthrough.

They said "We cannot understand why Norway cannot use a tiny fraction of the oil income on schools and health", while the Labour party simply continued with - in a Norwegian context - absolutely meaningless austerity policies. The electoral slogans of the two parties say it all. The Labour party had "If welfare is important", while the populist party had: "Welfare is important".

If there had been elections one year ago the rightwing populists would have been in government. But a series of sex scandals and a "Great Terror" against all opposition (real or imagined) by the party's leader, made it impossible for ordinary people to support this party so their votes went to the Conservatives.

The populist party lost 10-15 percentage points from their all time high in the opinion polls. Nonetheless, the party still

managed a good result, only 0.5 per cent down from their very good result in 1997! It was only a disaster if one looks at what they potentially could have got.

However, the potential of rightwing populism is illustrated by the rise of a new regional party - Kystpartiet, the "Coast" party, which elected a representative in the 1997 elections and two members of parliament this time. On a national scale they are small - 1.7 per cent - but in the north of Norway they did get over 10 per cent on average.

For the left, both the SLP (Socialist Left Party) and REA (Red Electoral Alliance), it is important to stop the rise of the populist right, but that can only happen if the left unites and puts forward a real program. For the REA the problem is their opposition to any co-operation with the SLP. For the SLP the challenge is to be oriented towards mobilizing people instead of seeking compromises with the Labour party.

Another aspect of the historic change in the Labour party is the very low turnout. In the middle and upper class constituencies democracy is flourishing. The turnout is around and over 80 per cent.

In the constituencies of working people it is much lower, confirming that they see no point in voting - on the contrary it is the most rational thing to do if you do not want to support the rightwing parties, are not yet ready to vote for the Socialist Left Party and do not want to support the sexist, racist and "Stalinist" populist right.

Never before have so many voters changed party between two elections.

Spectacular success

The SLP did spectacularly well, doubling their share of the vote from 6 per cent in 1997 to 12.4 per cent! The main reason for this is of course that they took many voters from the Labour party.

However, this was not something that they fought for, on the contrary the party leadership was eager to use the success to get into a coalition government with Labour - with support from the Centre Party. The leadership has no real understanding of the challenge that the decline of the Labour party poses. It will be very interesting to see if they are going to develop a new analysis of the Labour party and what their own role is going to be.

The majority of the REA were rather optimistic before these elections. The target set was to get 2.5 per cent of the votes and one or two members of Parliament from Oslo and Bergen, where the REA has a real implantation, with results in the 5-10 per cent range in some working class constituencies and an average of 3-4 per cent.

However, as I pointed out in my analysis of the municipal elections in 1999, the REA did not politically challenge the Socialist Left Party and that is very dangerous since the two parties are competing for the same voters.

But in autumn 1999 the pro-bombing line of the SLP leadership (in the Kosovo war) made the hard-core left-wing voters inclined to vote REA alone. The pro-bombing line of the party leadership led to the emergence of an organized tendency in the SLP for the first time in decades, fighting openly against the most blatant rightwing tendencies. At the last congress (March 2001) this tendency did manage to pull the party to the left and they got rid of the most rightwing personalities in the leadership. That made the SLP more consolidated.

For example the youth organization of the SLP, which had turned left and declared itself a revolutionary organization

two years ago, worked in the election campaign for the SLP this time and had two persons from their leadership elected to parliament. This was in contrast to earlier elections where they had a much more distanced attitude to the SLP and were inclined to vote for the REA. The majority of the REA ignored this development inside the SLP.

Soft

Why is the majority of the REA soft on the SLP? There are basically two reasons. Firstly, that if the REA correctly criticized the rightwing tendencies of the SLP the latter would immediately counter by pointing to the still unfinished de-Stalinization of the REA. There are currents inside the REA that are "soft" Stalinists/Maoists and the REA leadership does not want any public discussion about it. They know very well that this is very bad public relations.

Secondly, many members of the REA have not broken with the traditionally Maoist analysis of the SLP as purely reformist. For example, in Bergen where the SLP is represented by hard-core left-wingers, the REA put up their own candidate without the slightest effort to try to unite the Marxist anti-capitalist left.

Even with an extraordinarily popular candidate, the REA did not achieve its target of getting him elected. There was clearly a possibility of co-operation with the local branch of the SLP, but the REA did nothing to make that happen.

Even if the SLP was just plainly a left-wing social democratic party, a revolutionary party cannot simply ignore them. However, that is what the REA did. They did nothing to get the left wing of the SLP or the SLP electorate to vote for them. Therefore, the REA ended up with only the REA hard-core voters.

This passive attitude of the REA majority was thoroughly criticized by the Internationalist League. The IL urged the REA to challenge the SLP politically, urging them to try to get an electoral agreement with the left wing of the SLP in order to isolate the right wing, but to no avail. And the REA was - as predicted - punished for trying to ignore the SLP. The SLP is the major strategic and tactical challenge for anyone who tries to build a revolutionary party with 4-5 per cent of the electorate behind it. Which is clearly possible, but dependent on a real regroupment strategy by the REA.

It is clear that if the REA continues to ignore the SLP the coming municipal elections in 2003 will become a new setback. For the Internationalist League it is imperative to raise this discussion about the SLP inside the REA.