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Youth camp

Thirty-three years of youth camps

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Next February the Fourth International will be holding its next World Congress. The Congress will elect a new leadership. Thomas Eisler who has been one of the Danish members has decided not to seek re-election for another term. This will be a goodbye to his work in the international youth secretariat as well. It will be the end of the era of Thomas's participation in the annual youth camps.

Thomas holds the record of having attended 33 camps since the first in 1984. For the last 15 years he has been one of the comrades responsible for the camp from the Fourth International leadership.

During this year's camp we talked with Thomas about the basis for the camp, the historical development and where the camp is now. Of course we had time to take a trip down Memory Lane, for Thomas to share some of his experiences from the camps with us.

The common ground for the summer camps

The first camp was in 1984 during a period of great optimism in the Fourth International both in its leadership and in the national sections. In the beginning of the 1980s, several sections in Western Europe had begun to build independent youth organisations in solidarity with the FI.

The Danish SAP founded the Socialist Youth League in 1981. As a part of building of youth organisations it was agreed to try to gather members of these organisations, for mutual exchange of experience and inspiration in a joint project within the framework of the FI – a summer camp of practical internationalism, where the members could meet each other face to face.

The FI and its sections later on have turned to build broad anti-capitalist parties and the historical developments have removed some of the 1980s grand optimism. The basic understanding, however, has not changed:

*the importance of building parties and youth organisations rooted in youth

* training new young cadres

* to facilitate they meet across nationalities and cultures.

Still political need for FI

Thomas considers the camp is still a unique opportunity despite the trend towards broader organisations. The alternative could be that the broad youth organisations organized their own camp.

This idea has also come forward in the European Left Party for example. But the political span from the Syriza Youth

to Die Linke's youth to SUF in Denmark is too big – such a project would stall in the planning phase because of the lack of political common ground. Our camp offers a unique opportunity, which the common political framework within the FI can offer, despite the need to gather broader parts of the youth. This framework makes it practically possible to organize the camp – the political programme can be broader than the FI itself, but still with a respect for the camp's starting point, and the security a common basic understanding also provides. [1]

Thomas gives an example from 1997. The camp gathered 500 people in France with a good political outcome on the basis of a common understanding of the how capitalism works and its development. This understanding could the participants further build and develop upon.

Later that year Thomas participated in an intercontinental meeting against neoliberalism in the Spanish State, 4000 were gathered. Like the later social forums, the goal was to connect movements and organisations fighting neoliberalism. But it was first of all the solidarity with the Zapatists that had really mobilised people. The consequence was that the participants' experiences from struggles in the different countries did not really come out in the debates.

Solidarity with the Zapatists was an important task and filled the FI youth camp that year.

At the same time as the intercontinental event, The World Youth Festival - which originates from the communist parties – was hosted by large delegations from for example North Korea, gathered 12- 13.000 people in Cuba for a festival where young people met to hear old people lecture them about the political situation and theory.

Thomas sees this as a clear example of the fact that numbers alone is not the decisive question. It requires a common political understanding to be able to organize further on the international level. It does not serve any purpose to think that the youth should be lectured to by old men. It is essential to build upon young people's own experiences and life situations as a starting point for organizing among the youth. Therefore, it still makes sense to try to gather the non-stalinist and non-reformist youth as equals with different international experiences.

The specific output of the camp?

Through its history the camp has played an important role in international initiatives recently in relation to the refuge and migrant movements. The camp has created crucial links to ensure the various national movements coordinate internationally.

In the 1990s, it was the joint campaign for a multiethnic Balkan and the various solidarity convoys for Bosnia. Before that it was the European campaign against nuclear missiles in Western Europe.

These are 3 examples from different periods in the camp. You could of course add a lot of current mobilisations to summits, COP processes, climate actions, boycott campaigns and so on.

The most crucial coordination is actually the more continuous exchange of experiences in relation to European movements and the continuous exchange of experience. The Red-Green Alliance's new program on feminism would certainly have looked quite different if not committed comrades had participated in the camp year after year and discussed a number of these issues with international comrades with other experiences outside of the narrow Danish context.

Furthermore you should be aware that it is a bad concept of how to make common European campaigns if, for example, the trade unions just translates the same 10 demands and mobilizes in all countries around them. The true international campaign is about common understanding of objective, which is set in the national perspective and thus also develops demands that can mobilize in different countries and fields of work.

The fall of the wall

Despite that the FI was a fierce critics of the Soviet Union, the fall of the wall and the subsequent crisis of the left has of course affected the camp. The FI tried to use the camp as the initiative that could try to rebuild a European left after the fall of the wall through opening up and broadening the camp. It was attempted to gather the non-stalinist parts of the left, including groups originating from the Communist Parties. This gave among other examples our Italian comrades the opportunity to work inside the Rifondazione Comunista and in Denmark to build the Red-Green Alliance.

Especially, we tried to reach out to former Soviet countries in Eastern Europe, and as part of this, we held the camp in Czechoslovakia in 1991. It happened without a strong group in the country, that could lift all the tasks before and during the camp. It was an attempt to reach out to groups in the region. Unfortunately, the attempts to build a new left wing in Eastern Europe have not been a great success.

It is shown by the numbers of participants from Eastern Europe since then. Only Poland and Russia participated on a regular basis for a number of years. Taking part in the camp was also quite difficult.

The camps were held in Western Europe and there are tough economical conditions. An example of this is the comrades from Russia, who had to hitchhike all the way from Moscow to France for the camp. But it was a very difficult issue to hold a socialist camp in Eastern Europe just after the fall of the wall. It was a requirement that all the staff should be employed, problems arose concerning women receiving less food than men. It was difficult to change it as it was an external staff.

Since then, older volunteering comrades have served the food. They understand when practical tasks have a political side as well. This can be addressed by the camp's leadership.

The following years had some of the largest camps in the history of the camp. The years overflowed with initiatives and parties that collapsed, and only a few survived the crisis, including FI and the youth camp. The camp soon became a broader gathering place, where anarchist also felt they had a place to meet in.

Most memorable camp

But no matter the amount of experiences Thomas has had and no matter the amount of anecdotes, the answer comes immediately when his asked about what has been his most memorable camp – his first camp in 1984! Most of the explanation is, of course, that you always remember your first camp, especially when Thomas was only 14 – it was the first holiday without his parents. Furthermore it was the first FI camp ever. The whole base of experience and institution that's now built around the camp was not there yet. The organization was said to be at the least ... wobbly...

But besides the camp of 1984 as the greatest single experience, Thomas especially points out the travels to and from the youth camps, the incredible long bus trips. You are forced to spend maybe 24 hours with your comrades locked in a bus no matter how unpleasant it is in the situation.

Something is always happening on the trip, that makes it memorable. Not just when the bus burns right after you left the camp on your way home and you have a few days extra in Portugal, but actually also on the quieter trips. The compulsion to be together for up to two days it just makes people silly and that creates fun experiences that tie comrades together.

The camp now and in the future

Thomas saw the Russian Revolution as being a long time ago, when he became politically active and went to his first camp in 1984. During this year's camp, we marked the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, and the camp has now existed for on third of this time. It reminds us of that for the participants, the first camps are also far back in history before they were born. The world has changed a lot since then – so why does the youth camp still exist asks Thomas. The answer is that it still have something to offer – it's a useful tool. For the Fourth International, the camp makes the FI something concrete, a concrete experience, a concrete politics, that we do not meet in everyday life.

Take a look at all the people, especially in Europe, who have become leading comrades in the FI or in the national sections within the last 33 years. They have all been a part of the youth camp and they have also experienced the FI as something concrete with direct personal relationships with other comrades from all over the world. The personal relationships have given a deeper recognition of each others historical experience: understanding of the national contexts and differences. Personal relationships have built the foundation for a continued cooperation in relation to campaigns or exchange of experience in writing.

In a Danish context we are working to build and strengthen the SUF and the Red-Green Alliance.

Its also quite clear that a large number from the new generation and leading comrades in central bodies and in academic work, local branches etc draw on their experiences and learning from the youth camps, including those who have not joined SAP, but have only attended the camp.

PS:

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[1] The camp has taken place every year since 1984. Different national organizations host it and take the responsibility for the practical questions but the programme is decided collectively by a meeting of representatives from the European delegations at Easter every year, and during the camp practical tasks are taken by rotating teams from the delegations. The camp has been organized in Belgium (2), Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France (11), Germany, Greece (2), Italy (6), Portugal (4), Spanish state (5), Sweden. **IVP**