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Nordic class struggle

Anarchist Federation of Scotland

May 24, 2013

The 'Nordic model' is the name given to the economic and social policies shared by Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Iceland which stress welfare provision, high taxation, and a corporatist approach to industrial relations and governance. It has come very much into vogue in Scottish political culture as part of the Independence debate, and is said to provide a more egalitarian yet achievable example for what an independent Scotland could look like, or at least, what it could aim for. There is no doubt that relative to our current neoliberal status quo the Nordic countries – and there are important differences between them – have a higher quality of life and a smaller gap between rich and poor. However, the Nordic example has become to a large extent mythologized and, because it has so much significance to the political direction here, especially among the Left, it deserves a more critical, class analysis. This is a big subject so here I only intend to point to a few examples of what has been happening recently to give some light to the other side of Nordic society.

So far there have been five nights of rioting in **Sweden**'s capital city, Stockholm. Many cars have been burned and the buildings attacked include schools and a police station. This comes after a man

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was shot dead by police, who said they acted in self-defence. The scale of the rioting, with firefighters responding to 90 different incidents on Wednesday night, declining to 70 last night, has shocked Swedish society. It has also led many people to look at why this could be happening in what is meant to be one of the most progressive countries in the world. Those involved in the rioting are said to be young and part of the immigrant community. They are angry at rising inequality and institutional racism, which they are disproportionately affected by.

“The reason [for the riots] is very simple. Unemployment, the housing situation, disrespect from police,” said Rouzbeh Djalaie, editor of the local *Norra Sidan* newspaper, which covers Husby. “It just takes something to start a riot, and that was the shooting.”

Although Sweden’s quality of life is higher overall than most other countries, according to OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) figures, it “has seen the biggest increase in inequality of any developed country over the past 25 years”.

In **Denmark**, a month-long lockout of teachers has come to an end this month. 50,000 teachers were stopped from teaching and 556,000 pupils had to stay at home. The teachers’ union refused to agree to a new collective agreement with the the Local Authorities’ Association, so the latter stopped their pay from 2nd April 2013. The new agreement was ostensibly about giving more power to head teachers to arrange the amount of time spent teaching rather than on preparation on a case by case basis with teachers. But, according to the Guardian’s reporter, this is really about extending the school day and moving away from the current educational approach, which is comparatively much more liberal than here in Scotland and gives a significant amount of free time to pupils to create, play and learn for themselves. Unfortunately, it looks like

this was a massive defeat for the teachers and that new conditions have been imposed by the government, paving the way for more 'reforms' in the future.

Last month, the threat of a national strike in **Norway** was stopped by government intervention at the last moment. Talks had broken down between the Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and others with the representatives of the employers, and a deal of a slight pay rise was agreed through a government mediator. The deal "will cover 156,000 union members and will set the bar for pay negotiations throughout the country" but in fact is much lower than previous years and comes at a time when there are demands to lower wages to maintain competitiveness.

Over 3,000 power workers were on strike for two weeks, this month, for a new collective agreement "risking blackouts". On May 16th, the government put a stop to the strike using powers that can end industrial action where it "it threatens human lives, vital infrastructure or national interests". This seems to be a quite frequent occurrence:

Workers have struck regularly over the past year in Norway in order to oppose repeated attempts to cut their pay and conditions. Last summer, offshore workers closed large parts of the oil sector to demand higher wages. The strike covered eight oil platforms on the Norwegian continental shelf, affecting 13 percent of the country's oil and 4 percent of gas exports. [...] The 16-day strike finally ended after the government intervened, invoking emergency powers to impose forced arbitration. This came less than a month after 50,000 public sector workers struck in pursuit of pay increases and in opposition to attacks on pensions.

Some of the most interesting stuff has been happening in **Iceland**. The country has received a great deal of coverage worldwide

for refusing to bear the tax burden of the economic crisis when the main banks went under. The people then replaced the government and demanded radical changes with a completely new direction from the days when speculative finance was at its height. A major part of that was drawing up a new constitution which included using responses gathered online – the ‘crowd-sourced constitution’. This was really innovative and allowed for more democratic input than normal. But according to Laurie Penny:

Here’s what actually happened. Although it is true that the three largest banks – Glitnir, Kaupthing and Landsbanki – were allowed to go bust in 2008, this was hardly a political choice: Iceland could do nothing else, because their debts were ten times the size of its GDP. It is also true that popular protest brought about a change in power. Demonstrations over the government’s handling of the crisis, particularly its promises to the IMF to repay the financial sector’s enormous debts to countries such as the UK and the Netherlands, started in 2008. On 20 January 2009, the usually reserved Icelandic people turned out on to the streets in their thousands, bashed kitchen utensils and threw fruit and yoghurt at the Althingi, the parliament building. They were demanding a change of government.

They got one. Referendums were promptly held on whether to repay foreign debts, and the state began to draw up a new constitution in consultations with the public that included garnering responses on Facebook. But then, the new administration tried to side with the IMF over the debts of the online bank Icesave and refused, in effect, to implement the constitution Icelanders had been promised. So much for the socialist utopia.

The recent elections in Iceland gave the previous Social Democrat-led government “the worst defeat of any ruling party since independence from Denmark in 1944”, despite serving in a coalition with the Left-Green movement that was meant to provide an alternative to the old parties who created the country’s economic crisis. In fact, things have now come full circle and there is a new coalition of the Independence Party and Progressive Party who seem intent on opposing the proposed constitution in its current form, pushing for new environmentally-damaging developments and defending the fishing quotas that benefit the wealthy elite. People voted for change but became completely disillusioned with the parliamentary alternative, and so they ran out of options.

The point in all this isn’t to say that these countries don’t have anything to show us in terms of really progressive reforms and of a different approach to the ruthless neoliberalism we’re used to. They do absolutely. As just one example, reading about Danish education in comparison to the Scottish system is frankly amazing. But it’s now under attack. Although they have had a commitment to welfare beyond the rest of Europe and especially the UK, these countries are, of course, capitalist. We can see a class struggle at work in all of them. International competition and the fallout from the economic crisis is hitting hard (although it differs from country to country), and there are political forces present that want more neoliberal restructuring and increased controls on immigration. In short, reforms that have been won are not permanent but are challenged and have to be fought for.