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Our history

Sweden's Potato Revolution

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It seems unexpected â€” but the effects of the February 1917 revolution in Russia were first felt in neutral Sweden. Together with the other Nordic countries Sweden was spared from the First World War but suffered food shortages and other hardships due to the surrounding conflicts.

The conservative Swedish government in 1914 didn't organize the country's food supply until it was too late. Meat, fat, livestock, potatoes and other crops together with leather, clothes, shoes and everything needed by a war economy were exported to Germany with mounting profits for Swedish tradesmen and wealthy farmers.

From 1916 the food situation of the Swedish working class deteriorated and rationing was introduced through a complicated system of state organs. As real wages had fallen since the outbreak of the war, strikes broke out among steel workers and social unrest spread.

In January 1917 bread was rationed. Three months later the rations were cut, and social protests exploded under the influence of the Russian revolution.

As in Petrograd in March, they began with working-class women protesting in small towns with demands for more ration cards and lower prices of milk and potatoes. The protests spread to the larger cities, and during the last two weeks of April more than a quarter of a million women and men participated in food protests all over Sweden â€” this in a population of 5.9 million with 70% living in the countryside.

Worker protests were not only in the form of demonstrations and meetings. They were often followed by direct action in the form of inventories of stores and storehouses, farms and other places where the protesters hoped to find food, particularly potatoes.

A group of women would forcefully enter a grocery store demanding to inspect it for hidden food. If they found some, they forced the owner to sell the items at their posted prices.

In some areas these inventories took the form of mass actions, as when 5,000 sawmill workers with families marched through the countryside in northern Å...dalen to investigate farms and village shops and force the owners to sell. In some places the investigations led to plundering.

Specter of Revolution

To the authorities the development seemed to get out of hand as conscript soldiers joined the hunger protests. In several of the garrison cities in Sweden, soldiers in uniform and in disciplined detachments, although disarmed by their officers, marched together with the civilian protesters or participated in socialist meetings discussing the Russian revolution.

During the spring of 1917 the reformist Social Democratic Party split as the left wing formed a new more revolutionary party, later to become the Swedish Communist Party. The new party was joined by the big social democratic youth movement.

Together with the anarcho-syndicalists the new party formed a left minority flank within Swedish labor. Inspired by developments in Russia, the youth movement formed an association named "Soldiers and Workers" within the army to fraternize with the workers under the slogan: "Don't fire against your class brothers!"

Sweden's Potato Revolution

Fearing revolution and lacking confidence in the loyalty of conscript soldiers, the authorities in Stockholm decided to organize a clandestine guard of some thousands of armed civilians. When these plans were revealed, the socialist left called for arming the working class, and forced the authorities to back down.

This was a couple of days before May First and many feared a general and violent confrontation as the labor movement mobilized its forces on the big day. The largest First of May demonstrations in Swedish history were disciplined and peaceful, however, as thousands of workers' guards protected them and prevented looting and confrontations with the military.

Beneath the surface of protests, inventories and demonstrations an important development of self-organizing unfolded. To formulate their needs and put forward their demands to the authorities, protesters in different parts of the country elected "hunger" or workers' committees, often as highly temporary organs of the mass movement.

In some places, however, the committees turned into workers' councils of the same type as in Russia and later in many parts of the world. The most famous example was the "Workers' Committee of April 16" in the small industrial town of Västervik in southern Sweden.

The committee of five delegates was elected at a mass meeting of striking and protesting workers, men and women, to take control of the city's food supply. It established workers' control of prices and profits, supervised the quality of food and grain, issued export licenses for fisheries, and upheld law and order through workers' guards. This was not done violently, except for some initial incidents, and the local liberal mayor cooperated with the committee and rejected an offer from higher authorities for military support.

The manifesto from Västervik "with demands for food, land to grow potatoes, an eight-hour work day and release of all arrested protesters from the hunger demonstrations" gained mass support throughout Sweden. Similar workers' committees were established in around 40 cities and towns, some with participation of all the currents of the labor movement, other only with the anarcho-syndicalists and the socialist left.

In some places, as in the northern city of Härnösand and the region of Ångermanland with large sawmill populations, the workers' councils established local power similar to Västervik. In Härnösand even the local police elected delegates to the council.

Split and Movement Decline

The movement, however, was soon to split. On May 7 the leaders of the old social democratic party and the Swedish Trades Union Council proclaimed the founding of "1917 Års Arbetarkommitté," the Labor Committee of 1917, as a central leadership of all the local hunger and workers' committees in the country. The local struggles were instructed to abstain from illegal and direct action, to instead concentrate on the forthcoming general elections in September.

With a victory for social democracy and the liberals, it was promised that the rightwing government would be defeated, the food situation solved and universal suffrage established. (In 1917 most men could vote for members of the second chamber in the Swedish riksdag/parliament, but the first chamber, which was elected indirectly through the municipalities and where the richest individual could have up to 40 votes, could stop legislation in the riksdag. Of course, women lacked voting rights.)

With this measure from above, local committees split as social democratic unions and labor communes withdrew. The leftwing forces tried to counter the development through electing their own central leadership of the mass movement. On June 6, "Arbetarnas landsråd" the national council of workers was elected at a mass meeting of 20,000 workers in Stockholm.

Sweden's Potato Revolution

The council has been called the PetroÂ-grad soviet of Sweden. But in contrast to the Russian central soviet, the Swedish one was not elected from the local committees and councils but was more like a front or campaign organization of left-wing forces.

It was formed the day after a severe confrontation in Stockholm, with tens of thousands of workers protesting outside the Riksdag. The police and military attacked the assembled masses. While some thought that this was the prelude to a revolution as in Russia, it was in fact the last act of the Swedish hunger movement of 1917.

During the month of May violent confrontations and riots had unfolded in several Swedish cities as desperate women tried to get access to bread and potatoes and were met by mounted police and military. The culmination of this social unrest occurred when sawmill workers disarmed a military force on the island of Seskarö, as far north in the Baltic Sea as you can go.

After the first summer harvest the food crisis eased, and in September social democrats and liberals won the elections and formed a coalition government. The liberal-socialist government, however, was blocked by the conservatives in the first chamber from carrying through constitutional reforms. As the war continued, the food situation again deteriorated the following year.

By then the hopes from the Bolshevik revolution were gone as the Finnish civil war ended in a bloody defeat of the reds with tens of thousands killed, wounded, imprisoned or disappeared. The horrible year of 1918 saw the decline of the Swedish left and the workers' committees generally reduced to small collectives of leftist unions and groups, in some places only organs of the anarcho-syndicalists.

The activity centered around prices and quality of food, shoes and other necessities. But since the anarcho-syndicalists abstained from "politics" and wouldn't get involved in struggle for universal suffrage and elections, the committees were marginalized when the issue of democracy again became central on the agenda.

With the German revolution of November 1918, even the Swedish Social Democrats threatened the conservatives in the first chamber with revolution. Through a mass demonstration in Stockholm with a thousand women workers in the front, they reminded the conservatives of the wave of hunger protests and revolutionary climate of the spring of 1917.

At the same time, the left socialists organized mass meetings for a Swedish socialist republic based on workers' soldiers' and peasants' councils. This imitation of the Bolshevik example certainly raised some fear within the Swedish bourgeoisie and monarchy. But in reality the movement of self-organizing from below was gone, and the result of the political struggle was a compromise.

What usually in Sweden is called the "democratic breakthrough" ended with the conservatives accepting universal suffrage in exchange for the survival of the monarchy, and a parliamentary system that didn't leave room for any self-organized workers' councils from below.

For the reformist Swedish social democracy this was the road to follow. For the left socialists becoming communists, the central problem of the councils of 1917 was the low consciousness of the workers. As a path to "the dictatorship of the proletariat," workers' councils were seen not mainly as an expression of workers' self-organizing, but rather of the party's own consciousness and plans. The high point reached by the struggle of 1917 would not return.

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Sweden's Potato Revolution

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