Swedish Social Democrats Drift Further Right on Nuclear Ban and the Environment

written by Jens Johansson | September 12, 2019



On Friday, July 12, after almost two years of discussion, the Swedish minister of foreign affairs, Margot Wallström of the Social Democratic Party, announced that the government has decided to not sign the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Wallström gave two reasons why she decided to not sign it: 1) the treaty in its current form is unclear on some definitions such as what kind of weapons are concerned and how the disarmament shall happen, and 2) if she would take the treaty to the parliament, the most likely outcome is that a majority would vote against signing it.

Currently Sweden is led by a government headed by the Social Democratic Party in coalition with the Center Party, the Greens, and the Liberals. The will to stay in power emerged after the last election in September 2018 and became the highest priority for the leadership of the Social Democrats, who found themselves facing the worst result in the whole history of the party with only 28.3% of the votes. Therefore, they decided to go into a coalition with the Green Party and the two right-wing parties, the Center Party and the Liberals.

This coalition meant that Social Democrats had to accept the right-wing parties influence on politics, which has meant a deterioration of public welfare, loosening rent control, restrictions of the right for workers to go on strike, and more. Thus, there seems to be no end of how many of the traditional core values which previously used to define the Swedish Social Democratic Party that the current leadership are willing to negotiate away. A world free from nuclear weapons, a no-brainer for anyone on the left, is apparently now something the Social Democrats can put up for discussion.

Instead of hiding behind excuses about technical formulations in the text of the treaty or the current parliamentary situation, the Minister of Defense Peter Hultqvist of the Social Democrats expressed more clearly why he thought that Sweden should not sign a treaty to ban nuclear weapons. The treaty, Hultqvist insisted, would hurt the military cooperation Sweden is involved in. Journalist Mikael Holmström in fact explained in Dagens Nyheter that both American, French, and British diplomats strongly warned Sweden against signing the treaty.

Beatrice Fihn from ICAN, an international anti-nuclear weapons agency which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 for its work on banning nuclear weapons, also said in a discussion with Wallström on Swedish radio that the real reason why the Social Democrats decided to not sign the treaty was that the Americans and the other countries which have nuclear weapons

strongly dissuaded Sweden from signing the treaty. They did so because Sweden signing could actually have made a real difference. Many other countries will in the near future decide whether they should also sign the treaty, and Sweden's choice could have served as an important example for other countries to follow, Fihn explained.

The politics of neutrality, which Sweden at least expressed outwardly during the Cold War, is now officially not a position Sweden holds anymore. Instead, Sweden openly cooperates in military exercises with other Western European countries and with NATO. Another important aspect of Sweden's military involvement with other countries and NATO is the manufacture and selling of weapons. Earlier this week, it was announced that the US Army signed a five-year contract with SAAB, a Swedish gun manufacturer, to buy weapons for a total value of US$445 million. Whether that contract still would have been negotiated if Sweden had signed onto the UN treaty is something we probably will never know.

Now, in times when the threat of nuclear war is the highest since the end of the Cold War, coming out against it would have been more important than ever. That is also the position among several of the fractions within the Social Democratic Party. For example, the youth section, SSU, and the women's association within the party, S-kvinnor, both stated that they thought it was wrong by the party leadership to not sign the UN treaty.

The Social Democrats giving up on many of their core values is a pattern which has been possible to witness more and more during the last decades. A similar case just a few months back occurred when Preem, a Swedish oil company, wanted to expand its refinery on the Swedish west coast. Preem's investment would have meant that the plant would become the single biggest emitter of carbon dioxide in Sweden if it could be built according to their plans. Even when confronted, the Social Democrats have been refusing to say anything about the refinery other than the matter is a technical and juridical question for the local municipality and the regional agencies to decide upon.

At the same time, a massive movement of youth against climate destruction is taking place in Sweden. Thousands of teenagers have, during the last year, gone on strike from their schools on Fridays in order to raise awareness about how much they care about the future of the environment. One of the teenagers who helped kick off the strike, sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg, is now internationally renowned. But still, even when there is a large public majority in favor of banning oil companies from building big refineries or in favor of signing a UN treaty to ban nuclear weapons, the Social Democratic leadership, instead of listening to the progressive voices and standing firmly for their core values, chooses to meet the will of the market. This signals to young people dreaming of a different world that politics is not about trying to create the world you want. Instead politics appears only as a kind of a technical administration of the forces of the market.

By forming the massive, now international #Fridaysforfuture movement, the youth of Sweden have started to mobilize their frustration with the current political system's inability to do anything meaningful against the destruction of the climate. How this movement will evolve is far from clear. But it certainly shows a promising sign of the great spontaneous creative capacity of young people dreaming of another future.

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