

Parliamentary successes – organisational crisis. The experiences of the Swedish Left Party¹

1. Preface

The 1990s were, from a certain point of view, among the most successful decades of the history of the Left Party. The former CP of Sweden², during the years 1990-93, initiated a radical course of political renewal. Despite growing resistance from the rows of the membership and not last the youth organisation³ towards the end of the decade, the parliamentary election results could be continually improved. In 1998, the Left Party obtained 12% of the votes in the Reichstag elections, its election result of all times and thus became the third-largest party in the Stockholm Reichstag.

The election year 1998 also marked a political turning point in the history of the Left Party, since for the first time, it was possible to agree upon a long-term and contractually agreed collaboration with the social-democratic minority government of prime minister Göran Persson and the Greens. Out of the former “permanent opposition party”, there thus became a party, which for 5 years now is involved in a limited governmental collaboration. In the meantime, the electoral Reichstag result of the Left Party, to be sure, has sunk to 8.3% of the votes, this result, however, still lies considerably over the traditional vote share of the party formerly oriented towards Eurocommunism, finds itself in comfortable distance of the 4%-barrier to entry into the Reichstag and is, last but not least, according to the polls, on a stable level.

From another perspective, the development of the Left Party, however, appears less positive. The number of members certainly, in comparison to the late 1980s, has risen to a full 13,000, however, this number is at present stagnant and probably, as a tendency, shrinking.⁴ The activities of the party limit themselves, to a greater extent than before, to the participation in parliamentary institutions and especially the active participation of party members in association works, in the trade unions etc. has shrunk markedly. In particular at the local level, cumulation of mandates in the meantime has become the rule rather than the exception, since the number of the active members is often equal to the share of parliamentary deputies and their substitutes.

¹ This text is a contribution at the workshop of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation “The Challenge of Party Reform – Experiences and problems of left European parties with the transformation of their organisation, structure and work mode”, Berlin 19th and 20th June, 2003.

² The Left Party (in Swedish: Vänstrepartiet) has had an eventful history, which can already been seen from its many name changes: founded 1917 as Social Democratic Left Party, it assumed in 1921 the name CP of Sweden (SKP) and joined the Comintern. In 1967, the SKP became “Left Party – the Communists” (VPK), and in 1990 finally, the word “Communists” was eliminated from the party’s name.

³ The youth organisation of the Left Party in 1993 changed its name from “Communist Youth” to “Young Left” (Ung Vänster).

⁴ More on that in the following.

This was obviously perceived as a problem by the party leadership, last but not least, because the high election result at the Reichstag elections of 1998 had created a structural discrepancy within the party between the possibilities for influence and the material resources of the Reichstag fraction in comparison to the possibilities and resources of the party apparatus. The party apparatus also had increasing problems to satisfy the growing expectations of existing and potential members and voters, which is why the debate over the reform of the party organisation since the mid/end of the 1990s assumed a broad space on the agenda for the work of the central executive of the party.⁵

2. Organisational crisis

Even if a large part of the organisational problems of the Left Party are of specific nature and in part can be traced back to the disharmonic development of electoral result and organisational development, the feeling that we were exposed to an organisational crisis was rather widespread. Last but not least, in the context of the terrific media career of Attac, which was founded in Sweden in January 2001, the interest for new organisational and political forms not only grew within the Left Party, but for example also in social-democratic circles in Sweden. This is hardly surprising: decreasing numbers of members and an ever more break-neck “hustling through” of new members have, in most Swedish political parties, led to a sneaking “over-ageing” of the membership.⁶

The membership crisis of the political parties has, apart from certain exceptions, also seized trade unions and associations, since also in Sweden the fabric of politics, leisure behaviour and not last the political public has clearly changed in the last decades. The Swedish model of association activities reaching into all social strata and promoted by the public sector (what in the Swedish discourse is often and with pleasure called “the popular movement democracy”) as well as the Swedish welfare state model⁷, for a long time traded internationally as a role model, have been subjected to the political and economic drifts of the last decades and since the end of the 1980s have been more and more deformed on the material plane.

It will hardly be necessary to give here a summary of the social demolition, which has turned the “Swedish model” in practice into a Europe “compatible” façade, since similar experiences have also been made in other European countries and not last in the Federal Republic. It would, moreover, go beyond the framework of this discussion to enter in this context into more detail on the deeper background of the structural changes of post-Fordist capitalism. It may, however, be stated that the greatest material cuts into the Swedish welfare net took place in the period from 1995-1998 in connection with the adjustment to the European currency union⁸ - significantly, under Social Democratic aegis.

⁵ The author of these lines was, from 1998-1999, assistant member of the executive board of the Left Party due to his function as executive chairman of the youth organisation of the party.

⁶ This is one of the results of the state “democracy investigation”. Demokratiutredningen: *En uthållig demokrati! Politik för folkstyrelse på 2000-talet. Demokratiutredningens betänkande* (SOU 2000:1, Stockholm 2000).

⁷ Gøsta Esping-Andersen categorises the Scandinavian welfare state model as “universal”. The two other Western models, according to Esping-Andersen, are the “Rhenanian” model, functioning according to corporatist principles, and the Anglo-Saxon, “selective” model. Esping-Andersen, G.: *The three worlds of welfare capitalism* (Cambridge 1990).

⁸ Even if Sweden just as Great Britain and Denmark (up to now) have not joined the currency union, the social-democratic government of Persson has created both the constitutional as well as the economic prerequisites for a Swedish membership. Linked to that were drastic cuts in the state budget in accordance with the convergence

From the perspective of this workshop, it is of greater interest to analyse the underlying process, which made the undermining of the achieved social reforms politically possible. This occurred, last but not least, by the recalibration of the established coordinates of the political understandings of the Swedish political mainstream.

3. Strategic omissions

An important point of departure for the analysis of today's organisational and strategic problems of the Swedish Left Party is the statement that the Swedish Left in the 1970s, i.e. at the height of its social influence, has made strategic mistakes, which have led to its being pushed gradually into the defensive and finally into the ideological offside.

Already since the 80s, various critical voices have pointed out that the bourgeois Swedish Right had succeeded, by an ideological "guerrilla warfare" designed for the long term, to decisively influence the socio-political and civil rights discourse of the country. This "Operation Right Shift"⁹ was initiated already towards the end of 1960s and anchored a way of thinking in ever more wide-ranging circles of the public-opinion forming elites that had been disputed before that time even in the ranks of the established bourgeois parties of Sweden.

The driving force behind this ideological offensive was by no means one of the bourgeois parties represented in the Stockholm Reichstag,¹⁰ but the Swedish Employers' Union (SAF).¹¹ The main enemy at that time – and this as well is significant – was not the social-democratic government, but the social-democratic roof organisation of the industrial unions (LO). During the 70s, SAF built up a network of publishing houses, PR institutions, private educational institutions and special media and, following the American lead, financed several right-wing *think tanks*.

The main goal group for these efforts of attempt at ideological influence, aside from decision makers in public administration and economics, were academics and media representatives. In this way, there was won the "battle for the minds" of even some important social-democratic top politicians. With the help of targeted and generously financed ideological campaigns, the neoliberal way of thinking was gradually implanted in broad circles of the Swedish academic and political elite and new political lines of conflict were created, which decisively weakened the traditional positions of Swedish social democracy.

According to the opinion of the Swedish historian Bo Stråth, the most important result of the ideologised debate of the 1970s was that the main battle line had shifted: Since the beginning of the 1980s, it runs rather between trade unions and social democratic governments than

criteria of the European Commission. In September 2003, it was decided by popular vote not to join the European currency union.

⁹ The concept is borrowed from the book with the same title by Sven Ove Hansson and Anna-Lena Lodenius of 1998.

¹⁰ At this time, seven parties were represented in the Swedish Reichstag: SAP (Social democratic), Moderata samlingspartiet (conservative), Vänsterpartiet (post-Communist), Folkpartiet (liberal), Centerpartiet (agrarian interest party), Christian Democrats and Greens. The five first-mentioned parties here constitute the traditional party spectrum.

¹¹ The roof organisation founded in 1906 in the meantime is called Svensk Näringsliv (Swedish Economy) in the framework of adaptation to a "modern" association image.

between social democrats and bourgeois right-wing.¹² This conflict ended for the time being with the defeat of the trade unions and introduced the beginning of the end of the Swedish model. Thus, it was the social democratic government of the Olof Palme successor Ingvar Carlsson, which in 1989 paved the way for the opening of the Swedish financial markets and the reduction of the until then strongly expansive public sector and introduced a comprehensive reshuffling of burdens to the detriment of their own standing voters.

The political conflict, which during the 1980s shook the Swedish social democracy, influenced to a considerable degree also the Eurocommunist VPK, which not in its self-understanding, but rather in its political practice was very much marked by the events within Swedish social democracy.

The parliamentary as well as the domestic policy existence as well as the self-understanding of the party had since the founding of the party in 1917 inevitably crystallised itself in the question of the relationship to social democracy. In practice, barred from governmental power and additional influence in the Reichstag due to the established cooperation of social democrats with two bourgeois centre parties and the impossibility to conceive of a cooperation with other parties, the self-understanding of the VPK was almost compulsively focussed on the question of gaining political respectability and responsibilities. This was demonstrated ever more often at the communal level, directly or indirectly, by way of collaborating with social democratic fractions.

The drifting apart of trade unions and SAP also led to this basic conflict being exported into the VPK and becoming a conflict between an activist-trade union part of the VPK and a pragmatic-parliamentarily aligned section. In this context, the feminist profile of the party also played an important role, since the trade union work of the VPK (as also the action of the social-democratic trade union left) was traditionally concentrated on male-dominated industrial branches. Within the VPK, this conflict gradually escalated into a bitter struggle between so-called “renewers” and so-called “traditionalists”.

The radical political turning point of the 1980s, however, was the result of a process brought about by the incapability of left organised interests to early on realise the counter-offensive of the right centre that had begun long before and to combat it. Whereas Sweden’s radical, student left lost itself in sectarianism, some parts of it started the long march through the institutions and became pragmatic *realo* politicians, the Left in Sweden long harboured the illusion that there existed in the country a sort of lasting social democratic “hegemony”.¹³ Whereas on the one side, the mantra of the success of Sweden’s “third way” substituted the political analysis of actual developmental trends on the national as well as on the international level, the non-social democratic Left developed the mantra of the verbally radical attacks against the social democratic party and trade union leadership.

¹² Stråth, Bo: *Mellan två fonder. LO och den svenska modellen* (Stockholm 1998), p. 244 f. A very meaningful example for this was the conflict that broke out in the mid-80s in the party executive of the Swedish social democracy that in a simplified manner and with an allusion to the symbol of the social democrats was described as the “war of roses” between “office righties” and “trade union lefties”.

¹³ Åsa Linderborg has shown in an impressive way that this self-understanding continues to influence the self-descriptions of the social-democratic elites. Compare Linderborg, Åsa: *När socialdemokraterna skriver historia. SAP:s historieskrivning 1893 – 2000* (Stockholm 2001).

4. Back to politics

The roll-back of the 1980s not only in Sweden led to a pushing aside of the Left into ever further removed defence bastions. In so far as the Left party was concerned, the fall of real-existing socialism in Eastern Europe was taken as the occasion to shake off the Communist party history. At first, this led to an inner-party landslide victory of the renewal tendency, then more and more to fierce battle about the ideological profile of the party, which as before does not seem to have been decided.¹⁴ The reideologisation of the Left Party in effect went hand in hand with the first attempts out of the trade unions to get strategic questions and rather more visionary political topics again onto the political agenda.

An important reason for the attempt of the trade unions to strengthen their political impact by way of a return to politics in the trade union positions in this context was the ultimate collapse of the central, national collective bargaining arrangements in Sweden. The Swedish trade union analyst Örjan Nyström has pointed to the fact that the trade union side for a long time did not want to acknowledge the crisis of the old-established system of negotiations that had threatened since the late 70s, and therefore, for a long time, had to accept a considerable tactical disadvantage. According to Nyström, the adaptation of the trade union strategy to the changed situation of departure only took place after 1996, when the defence of the Swedish business constitution laws and the extension of firm-level co-determination were elevated to be the most important questions.¹⁵

In this period, there also falls the establishment of the first trade union *think tank* called “LO-idédebatt”¹⁶ in the year 1997. An important reason for this wager on strategic questions was, last but not least, the circumstance that one was forced to accept in trade union circles that one’s direct influence on the top of social democracy was waning, this despite the fact that leading trade unionists as before sat in the party executive of the SAP (and do so until this day). This forced the trade union leadership to initiate a broader strategic discussion itself and to goal-consciously undertake the attempt to establish a counter-pole to the *think tanks* of the employers’ union.

In this context, LO-idédebatt is also to be seen as a reaction to the criticism from bourgeois and certain social-democratic commentators, who try to discredit the protests out of trade

¹⁴ The most recent scandal is a call of 181 party members against „neocommunist” within the Left Party, which was published in 2003, *S. Dagens Nyheter*, May 15.

¹⁵ Nyström, Örjan: *Mellan anpassning och motstånd* (Stockholm 2000). The traditional Swedish bargaining model, occasionally called “Scandinavian neocorporatism”, ever since 1938, had built on national negotiations between the roof organisations of the employers and the industrial trade union federation (LO). The common goals were renunciation to strikes etc. and an active state labour market policy for compensating the burdens between strong and weak industrial branches. There were added economic growth and full employment as prerequisites and goals of this labour market policy. Interestingly, and rather indicative of the desolate situation of the left strategy debate, in this respect, is the fact that this model, in the framework of social democratic self-adulation often called “people’s home”, is still being defended by the former critics from the Left, i.e. Left Party and certain C groups, against “neoliberalism”.

¹⁶ In Sweden, workers, employees, and academics are organised in different trade union roof organisations (LO, TCO or rather SACO). In this text, the term “trade union movement” is used synonymously with LO, the roof association of the industrial unions. LO is the Swedish interest organisation with the highest number of members, around 1.918.000 at present according to its own claims. Since the trade union affiliation takes place by branch, many employees also belong to the roof organisation, which according to its statutes was an organisation close to social democracy.

union circles against the welfare and labour law reforms of the 1990s with reference to the conservatism and the “development hostility” of the Swedish trade union roof organisation.

It was the declared short-term goal of LO-idédebatt to feed the societal debate about labour law and co-determination. At the same time, LO-idédebatt at the same time was also an attempt to link the political education of the trade union elites to the academic debate concerning the perspectives of the Swedish welfare state model in the era of globalisation. Influenced by the parallel discussion concerning the social democratic “loss of hegemony” and the conflicts between trade unions and the social democratic government of Persson about the social cuts of the preceding years, LO-idédebatt in the beginning concentrated on the attempt to draw academics and journalists into the trade union training of top functionaries.

In the meantime, LO-idédebatt has developed into a network of radical trade unionists, academicians, and publicists. Beyond that, the seminars of LO-idédebatt have in the meantime, not last thanks to the collaboration with the Stockholm Centre for Marxist Social Studies (CMS)¹⁷, assumed the important function of bridging the gap between social democrats, ex-Communists and other left forces.

5. Education of members

But also the attempt to “re-conquer” political questions has not been able to prevent that also the Swedish trade unions have to suffer from losses in membership and increasing passivity of their members. This, last but not least, has to do with the fact that the trade union apparatus, which is completely aimed at formalised, central negotiations with the employers’ side, has turned out to be clumsy and inflexible. One of the most important tasks of the trade unions is, therefore, to (re-)activate and train their own members.

LO-idédebatt up to now, however, has not been extended and therefore reaches the lower and medium levels of the trade union cadre apparatus only to a very small extent. While there have been efforts to found regional “branches”, the regional offerings do not reach beyond very few seminars and lectures. Moreover, the offerings of LO-idédebatt are only in exceptional cases coordinated with the (increasingly slimmer) programme of the traditional, trade union educational work.¹⁸

6. Network parties

The established parties of the Left also have similar problems as the trade unions, both Social Democracy and the for a while in Sweden much grown challenger, the Left Party.¹⁹ While the SAP loses members and above all has problems to win younger members, the Left Party in contrast to that, for a long time, could not find a concept to channel the member influx of the

¹⁷ CMS is a foundation for political education, which in 1977 was founded by the executive of the Left Party-Communists. The foundation is not promoted with monies from the authorities and depends on donations and the support by the Reichstag fraction of the Left Party. Chairman of CMS since its foundation is C.H. Hermansson, long-time chairman of the party. CMS’ events are concentrated on the Stockholm area, since the year 2000, however, there exist branches in four South Swedish university towns.

¹⁸ Sahlström, Olle: *Den röde patriarken* (Stockholm 1998), in particular p. 178 ff.

¹⁹ I hereby deliberately bracket the Greens, which in Sweden have never understood themselves as a “left-wing” party. Even if the Greens to a certain extent adopt positions, which lie very close to those of the Left Party, they are to be understood more as a radical-democratic movement of the (academic) political middle.

late 1990s. In the meantime, above all after the electoral defeat in the year 2002, the membership numbers also for the Left Party are presumably at least stagnant.²⁰

A basic problem in this context is that, given low membership activity within the SAP as well as Vänsterpartiet, the political daily work has become synonymous with communal political administration and in the best case campaign work. This trend is reinforced by the tendency of the respective party heads to react to the rapid speed of today's mass-medial public with a "professionalisation" of politics. As the Norwegian political scientist Knut Heidar notes, this has resulted in traditional mass parties becoming modern "network parties". According to Heidar, parties like the Swedish Left Party have become professionalised "campaign organisations", which rely more on networks of external experts, advertising agencies and lobbyists than on the mobilisation and education of their own members. At the same time, there grows within these parties – quite in contrast to the development within extra-parliamentary movements – the gap between "large-scale", national and "small-scale", local politics.²¹

As far as the Left Party is concerned, this can be elucidated with the painful process to anchor the feminist profile of the party within all party structures. In 1995, the Left Party was by statute named first feminist party of Sweden. Due to the absence of a broader anchoring of feminist positions within the membership of the party, there still, over years, broke out conflicts over the relationship between "feminism" and "Marxism", "gender" and "social class" in membership magazines and at party congresses. Also from the purely structural point of view, the participation in local study circles, seminars and the forums for members' discussions, such as membership magazines and virtual "discussion bases", is to a large extent male.

One interesting aspect in this context is that the party congress decision of 1995 interestingly enough coincided with the dissolution of the study secretariat of the party and the journal for theoretical debate, *Socialistisk Debatt*.²² It remains to surmise that the discrepancy between programme and practices will mount, when possibilities for broad discussion within the party are lacking.

Heidar's thesis also comes to expression in one of the most significant organisational problems of the Left Party: since the share of active party members is sinking, many local and district organisations of the Left Party by now have considerable problems to fill their parliamentary subsidiary mandates. The parliamentary expansion of the 1990s, moreover, has sharpened the organisational problems of the parties: accumulation of mandates and the fusion of party and parliamentary work today are to a large extent on the agenda, despite various attempts to counteract this trend. Above all membership activities like political studies, organisational training and open debates suffer from it. Also the number of members, which can be mobilised in electoral campaigns, is decreasing, which hand in hand with the

²⁰ The Left Party lost 3.7 percentage points in the last elections to the Reichstag, however, it continues to be one of the collaboration partners of the social-democratic minority government of Göran Perssons. Significantly, ever since December 2001, no membership statistics have been published any longer. My guess, therefore, is based on the generalising assumption that the trend, which can be noted demonstrably in Norrköping, Malmö and other cities, also holds for the whole country.

²¹ Heidar, Knut: *Statsvitenskaplig utsyn* (Oslo 2001).

²² *Socialistisk debatt* was "saved" by the initiative of individual party members and readers and at first published by an association that was close to the Centre for Marxist Social Studies. Beginning in 2000, the journal has been published directly by the CMS.

overstress on voluntary executive members leads to a strengthening of the influence of employees of the party at the expense of executive boards.

One final line, which was drawn in an organisational analysis of the years 1998/99, basically entailed the idea to foster the cohesion of the party by way of the professionalisation of the party organ Vänsterpress²³. Moreover, one came to the conclusion that the communication paths within the party should be made more effective and opened up, among other things by way of regular national conferences on chosen topics. There was also talk (sic!) about “competency networks”, which are to be “coordinated” by party executives and function “virtually”, i.e. via E-mail.

7. “New policies”

This kind of ideas stems from the analysis that the decisive impulses for the social resistance in the age of globalisation have no longer come from the ranks of the traditional left movements, but from the so-called new social movements. This is expressed with all obviousness on the homepage of the Vänsterpartiet, where under the rubric: “Activate yourself!”, one finds mainly links to diverse NGOs.²⁴

Already for a long time, sociologists have tried to analyse the phenomenon of the “new social movements”. Student movement, women’s movement, environmental movement, peace movement, solidarity movements and recently also movements of unemployed and migrants etc. are, with pleasure, seen in contrast in the classical social movements and parties. The pathos of these movements and the enthusiasm of their basis, however, last but not least, reminds one of the young workers’ movement and its ambition to create alternative life worlds, even if the respective historical circumstances are of course different.

Thanks to the enormous potential of new communication techniques and new globalised structures of economic and intellectual life, the old internationalism could actually, of course, receive a new concrete content in new social movements. Despite all structural differences between “old” and “new” social movements, the core element of the social dynamic of these movements is the striving for alternative publicity and social “free spaces”. Similar to the young workers’ movement, today’s social movements are dedicated to the defence and the extension of “self-willed” spheres in the bourgeois-dominated ideological space. This aspiration was once one of the prerequisites for the historical force of the workers’ movement.²⁵

In contrast to the traditional and for a long time socially integrated workers’ movement, which, as I variously hinted already, is kept busy more and more by their parliamentary power claims, the younger movements are as before offensive and “self-willed” outsiders. The future of the global Left, however, does not depend in the first line on mobilisation to more or less militant counter-demonstrations against World Bank, G-8 and other symbols of international power relationships, but such demonstrations, without any doubt, have a very motivation-

²³ Vänsterpress appears with 10 issues a year and functions at the same time as membership magazine as well as organ of the party executive aimed at the press, which leads to certain conceptional conflicts.

²⁴ http://www.vansterpartiet.se/PUB_AktiVera/6580,6578.cs.

²⁵ On the notion of “self-willedness“, see Lüdtker, Alf: *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag. Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis zum Faschismus* (Self-willedness. Daily life at the factory. Workers’ experiences and politics from the German Empire to Fascism), Hamburg 1993.

promoting and under certain circumstances also a considerable medial use-value. The stubborn self-willedness and the capacity to go into the strategic offensive, which the mass demonstrations of the movement, misleadingly called “globalisation enemies”, in the last years have shown in impressive clarity, has to be re-conquered by the left *parties* – while at the same time the possibility to achieve parliamentary influence should not be given up.

This means of course that the left parties have to extend their horizon of experience and analyse and use the dynamics of political fights of the extra-parliamentary movements. This is not a new idea. In the case of the Swedish Left Party, this realisation, however, has been reduced to the denominator of “internet networks” and “electronic democracy” and the possibilities of modern communication technique have, for most approaches to organisational re-orientation, mutated to compass, goal and aim in themselves.

As far as the organisational side is concerned, the approach of opening so far closed party structures to further circles of members is of course principally important, however, it is not sufficient. Quite apart from the fact that the possibility to participate via computer in open debate forums is just as before only put into action by a rather specific and often male user circle, such forums also have the tendency to easily degenerate into “talking shops”. This means that the debates led there have hardly any up until no influence on actual party work. If one wants to pursue the path of “virtual party” further, one should not make the mistake of decoupling the really existing party work from the online information. And neither Internet solutions nor the ostentatious participation of Left Party representatives at mammoth gathering such as the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre can in the long run replace the local and *broad-based* social anchoring of a left movement.

The future of the Left Party, therefore, in my opinion lies in a reconstruction of the party as *movement*. For one thing, the social debate of such a movement should be adapted to the conditions of modern capitalism – the exploited of the advanced service societies must be able to join this movement just as industrial workers and the new global underclass of the illegal and half-legal migrants²⁶. For the other, this movement has to open itself to the influence of new social movements and advanced spiritual and social scientific research, for instance in the area of Marxist and feminist theory building. The prerequisite for that seems to be an open and free discussion of the possible distribution of tasks and organisational structure of such a “new” workers’ movement. This is a challenge, which the Swedish as well as the European workers’ movement and, last but not least, the new social movements have to confront.

8. Utopian Energy

The core question for a Left Party like the Swedish, whose efforts at organisational renewal seem to be characterised by a strange mixture between adjustment to parliamentary conditions and resistance against the demands of “new politics”, is in this context, how the Utopian energy of the young organised workers’ movement can be rediscovered.

From the primacy of parliamentary politics, not last for smaller left-wing parties, there results the dilemma that the political core views of great part of the membership easily get into conflict with the limited possibilities for more deep-reaching social transformation, which are offered by positions of power in local communities, regions or the Reichstag. A political understanding which equates “being established” with electoral results and participation in

²⁶ According to Ulf Hannerz, the share of individuals with limited state civic rights in the Western world is growing steadily. See Hannerz, Ulf: *Transnational connections: culture, people, places* (1996).

local, regional and national parliamentary power, of course entails that “established” political parties of necessity have to move in the framework of the ruling social order. This in the worst case is perceived by members as well as standing voters as a discrepancy between the parliamentary work of the party and the programmatic statements by party and electoral programmes.

This becomes a constant problem for a left, which understands itself as visionarily transcending the system, yet which no longer sees a possibility to pursue a goal-conscious, counter-hegemonic project. Since the traditional parties of the Swedish workers’ movement, i.e. Social Democrats and (ex-)Communists, have out of pragmatic considerations largely abandoned their system-transcending aspirations, we have not only gambled away the possibility to *fundamentally* change the existing conditions, but – and this is the theme of our workshop – on top of it created an inner-party structural crisis, which it is only difficult to solve.

For the Left Party as well as the SAP, it can be stated that the gap between programmatic class struggle rhetoric and a daily politics, which at this time especially at the local level is synonymous with the administration of material savings, becomes ever more apparent. This becomes an organisational problem for both parties, since parts of the membership (SAP) or rather, in the case of the Left Party, the majority of the membership and, last but not least, the sympathisers of these parties have problems to identify with this policy of steps backward with respect to the social state.

Beyond that, it is necessary to admit that the traditional left-wing parties, and that means social-democratic as well as (post-)Communist parties, today have to be viewed as in essence conservative structures. This goes back, last but not least, to the rigid organisational form. At the same time, one should not overlook that these organisational forms have revealed themselves as very effective in the battle for parliamentary influence. In contrast to most extra-parliamentary one-issue movements, which often can unfold a considerable inner dynamic, the Swedish Left Party (not to mention the Social Democrats) at present is lacking a political project that would develop the necessary Utopian energy, which is needed to mobilise long-term members and keep more recent ones in the party.

This is quite obvious to the party leadership of the Left Party. The present attempt by party executive and programme commission to create such a project in the form of an offensive debate about power and property forms has, however, encountered fierce resistance in the own rank and file. This is clearly shown by the currently raging disputes among tendencies in the Left Party: A vehement quarrel has broken out over the succession of the chairman of the Left Party, Gudrun Schyman, who hastily left her place in January 2003, and it is led externally rather than internally.²⁷ Among other things, because this inner-party power struggle has to be adapted to the preferences of the media, the internal debate becomes a conflict between “renewers” and “Neocommunist”. In numerous letters to the editor, press releases and debate editorials it was and is being claimed that the Left Party was on the way of being taken over by the “Neocommunist”. In this context, the current programme draft of

²⁷ Schyman saw herself forced, following a media scandal around her allegedly attempted tax evasion, to leave the party chairmanship. In the beginning of February 2003, the Reichstag’s deputies Ulla Hoffman and Alice Åström were instated as Commissaric vice-chairmen by the party leadership, the new party chair(wo)man was elected in January 2004 by the delegates of the party congress of the Left Party.

the programme Commission of the Left Party is being attacked as example for this development.²⁸

This can, of course, out of a logic of media conduciveness, be interpreted as the expression of a simple leadership crisis around personalities. Also during Gudrun Schyman's tenure, the inner-party trench wars at times burst to the surface, however, her critics never dared to challenge her directly, since she was seen as the decisive guarantor of the electoral successes of the party. Schyman regularly received top results in politician preference and politician trust ratings and could therefore afford to occasionally provoke the party apparatus as well as more or less large parts of the membership and to ignore party executive decisions as well as the conflict-laden work of the programme commission.

One can, however, not neglect the fact that from the perspective of the organisational stability of a Left Party, it is to be considered rather the expression of a structural leadership crisis, if party structure is reduced to the person of the party chairwoman and possibly a handful of medial secondary actors. Last but not least, this heightens the vulnerability of a party: The loss of trust in the party chairwoman then obviously inevitably draws in its wake a severe crisis of the whole party, not only in the eyes of the media, but last but not least also in the eyes of that part of the members, who – absent other faces of contact within the party – just as non-party members tie their loyalty in the first instance to the person of the chair(wo)man.

9. Open understanding of politics

At a time, when the European Left after years of failures finally seemed to be on the rise, various analysts pointed to the fact that during the 1990s a “new Left” had developed left of social democracy. Spain's Unified Left (*Izquierda unida*), the flora of left-wing French parties (PCF, LO, LCR, Greens etc.), the Swedish *Vänsterpartiet* and also the PDS were voluntarily mentioned as examples of a parliamentary Left, which had supposedly filled the vacuum left of the political centre that had emerged because of the Right Shift of most social-democratic parties of Europe.²⁹

This, however, seems to have been an illusion, as the negative development of the electoral figures of all of these parties indicates. Electoral successes can thus delude, as last but not least the example of the Swedish Left Party shows. The Left quite apparently does not seem to be capable of drawing anything else but electoral use-value from the dissatisfaction with the post-Keynesian economic policy, and this, as described above, not infrequently at the expense of loss of their trust capital with their own members and, last but not least, in the circles of their traditional constituency.

This leads to the conclusion that it will require a greater effort to convey to the Left Party the character of a dynamic movement “turned towards the future”. Since the occasional attempts of left parties to incorporate existing movements are successful rather rarely, to me the more

²⁸ A number of guest comments and “calls“ to this effect were published in the largest morning paper of Sweden, the liberal *Dagens Nyheter*. See DN, 2003-02-06, DN 2003-02-14, DN 2003-05-15. Corresponding texts were published in most of the larger daily papers of the country.

²⁹ One encounters this opinion, for example, in Hudson, Kate: *European communism since 1989: towards a new European left?* (London: 2000). The Swedish, social-democratic journalist Olle Svenning stated in this connection that this process has occurred simultaneously with the apparently growing alienation of the trade unions from the social-democratic governments. Svenning in Arbestål, Sven Olof (ed.): *Finns arbetarrörelsen? 16 inlägg om facket och politiken* (Stockholm 2000).

promising strategy seems to be one, which reminds itself that only an *lively* party can be a natural focus for social movements close to them. This entails that the understanding of “politics” has to be widened and opened up. In Sweden, especially the “old” trade union movement has started to see this and has begun to approach the extra-parliamentary movements in a certain manner. At the same time, one is, however, cautiously intent on preserving and emphasising one’s own history as identity-founding “success story”.

However, this process of opening of the traditionally very social-democratically oriented trade unions is disturbed by the obvious flirting of the leadership of the Left Party with the trade union basis. Even if it is understandable that a left party, which counts itself to the workers’ movement, tries to extend its direct anchorage in the trade union circles, this attempt at taking influence of course has the negative effect of cementing old (anti-Communist) prejudices in trade union circles and of carving new trenches.

Only an unbiased and self-critical dialogue, free of organisation-egoistic pragmatism can guarantee, however, that trade unions as well as left parties can find their way back to their radical roots. Such a dialogue between equal partners has to take place in open arenas. LO-idédebatt is certainly a serious, however, also only a modest attempt to create such an arena. If one wants to win the “small intellectuals” of the society, the workers’ movement has to reconquer its former ideological and political initiative on a much larger scale. This, in my opinion, requires a concerted effort of left forces in society, which aims at promoting alternative debate forums and creating free spaces for the strategic debate of the whole left. Until then, however, it is a far cry, and the means at our disposal are rather limited.

A promising and relatively simple model for such a forum was tested in the Northern Swedish Umeå for the first time in 1998: At the “Socialist Forum”, there met representatives of all shades of the left to discuss in various workshops topical themes and general problems. From the beginning on, it was tried to avoid a party-political takeover by the establishment of certain basic procedures and the refusal to exclude specific organisations of the Left. The organisers were LO-idédebatt, the educational centre of the workers’ movement, ABF, and the radical-democrat association “Ordfront”.

The Socialist Forum was organised against the resistance of the local Social democrats, who among other things threatened to refuse the important material support by the city of Umeå. Yet, the enterprise became an important success. More than 800 participants took place at the First Socialist Forum, and they could have been more, if space had permitted. In the meantime, open socialist forums, which gather representatives for social democracy, trade unions, Left Party, extra-parliamentary movements and C groups, have been held in various cities with impressive success. The interesting thing is that the ever again surfacing criticism of the etiquette “socialist” and of the categorical renunciation of the organisers to exclude certain organisations or actors per se up to now have been weathered with a great majority.³⁰

Translated by Carla Krüger, 5/6/04

³⁰ A topical example is my own town of Norrköping, where the attempt by the local social democrats to rename the forum into “Radical Forum” has failed due to the resistance of the trade union representatives.

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