

Summer days on Utøya

by Dan Gallin

I shall never forget the summer days I spent in 1955 on Utøya, the small island near Oslo that the Norwegian trade unions had given to the Labour Youth League as a study and leisure centre.

I had arrived in Europe in March 1953, back from the United States where, as a student, I had discovered socialism in the shape of a Trotskyist dissidence. The brilliant explanation of the world, the heroic and tragic story of the “Old Man” and his movement, had taken hold of my imagination and my emotions. So much so that I drew the attention of the authorities who gave me one month to leave the country.

So there we were, my companion and I, in Europe and needing to find our bearings. She was a member of the same group. By the summer of 1955, we were ready to discover Scandinavia, the bastion of a social democracy that we viewed with suspicion.

In Oslo, we found the Labour Youth League in the phone book. We turned up unannounced at the office of the man in charge, who was the General Secretary, and told him we were members of the American Socialist Youth League and we were looking for Norwegian socialists to discuss socialism with. The Norwegian comrade looked at us for what seemed quite a while and then said, “You’ve timed it nicely. Our summer course has just started. Later on, we can take you over there. You can spend a week with us. It’s on Utøya, a little island near Oslo. You’ll see.”

On Utøya, there is a central building for the logistics (meals, showers, course rooms) and the participants were living in tents pitched all over the place, but mainly in a meadow in front of the building. We were assigned a tent, but we spent most of our time with the young Norwegians. I spent a whole night discussing with Reiulf Steen, who was later to become the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister, very much involved in assisting the resistance movements against the dictatorships in Latin America. We discussed the USSR, its social and political nature, and Stalinism. One night was not enough.

We met many of the hundreds of young socialists who were full of energy, joy, humour and determination, sons and

daughters of the midnight sun which, during the Norwegian summer, never sets. They were ordinary young people, citizens like all others in a social democracy. No professional revolutionaries, but they *were* out to change the world. There were as many of them on this little island, maybe even more, than in the whole of our American grouplet. The American comrades whom we had left behind were no less committed and courageous, but we had now discovered something we had not experienced before – a mass movement of young socialists.

This was the movement that Anders Behring Breivik, a fascist activist, attacked on 22 July 2011. After setting off a bomb in the government quarter of Oslo, killing eight people, he landed on the island disguised as a policeman, called together the young people there and started gunning down defenceless youngsters who had not had the slightest inkling of what was about to happen to them. On Utøya, Breivik killed 69 people in the space of an hour and a half.

Norway’s Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, who is also the leader of the Labour Party, declared that the massacre was an assault on democracy and the open society, and he pledged that Norway would not cave in to it. More precisely, though, it was an attack on the Norwegian labour movement. Breivik was quite explicit: the labour movement, guilty of “cultural Marxism”, had to be targeted – and what had to be hit was labour’s most precious asset, its youth, to punish it for betraying the nation by promoting its “islamisation”. If the shooting had happened just a few hours earlier, Stoltenberg himself and former Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland might well have been among the victims. They had visited Utøya that day, to take part in the debates.

We socialists ought to be more concerned about what is happening to us in Northern Europe. On 28 February 1986, Sweden’s Prime Minister Olof Palme was assassinated. He had been to the cinema with his wife Lisbet, and as usual they had no bodyguards. At 11.20 p.m., while they were walking home, a man stepped up from

behind and fired two pistol shots. The first one mortally wounded Palme. The second one injured Lisbet, who survived. The assassin fled and was never found. A man was arrested and sentenced, but was later released upon appeal. The motives for the assassination, and those who may have ordered it, were never identified. The police investigation, which went on for years, led nowhere.

Stemming from the upper reaches of the bourgeoisie, Palme was a “traitor to his class” and the Swedish Right harboured an intense hatred for him. In government since 1965, twice Prime Minister (1969-1976 and 1982-1986), and Chairman of the Social Democratic Workers' Party (SAP) from 1969 to 1986, he strengthened the Social State even further, as well as the trade unions' power vis-à-vis the employers. As regards foreign policy, he was the only leader of a western government to oppose the Vietnam War. He also opposed the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Pinochet coup in 1973 and more generally, throughout his career, the military dictatorships in Latin America, the fascist dictatorships in Europe and the apartheid regime in South Africa. Although never really on the Left of the Party, he has often been described as a “revolutionary reformist”.

Palme's assassination was a turning point in the history of our movement. None of his successors have had his charisma, political intelligence and daring. The SAP lowered its profile. In fact, its moderation probably pushed it out of office. It has lost two parliamentary elections in a row since 2006. It has less of an international presence now, and as a result the Socialist International has lost some more of what little influence remained to it. Had Palme lived, the capitulation of social democracy to neoliberalism and the “third way” buffoonery of Blair and Schröder would have been more difficult. If Palme's assassination had been the result of a right-wing conspiracy, that plot would have achieved its aims.

It could all have gone differently. In 1998, Swedish Social-Democracy had somewhat recovered. It had a rising star: born in 1957, Anna Lindh was the brilliant chairperson of the Social-Democratic Youth League from 1984 to 1990, a Member of Parliament from 1982 onwards, Environment Minister in 1994, and Foreign Minister in 1998. She was cast in the Palme mould, and the intention was that she would succeed the dull bureaucrat Göran Persson as head of government and of the Party.

But the assassin was lying in wait. On the afternoon of 10 September 2003, Anna Lindh was shopping in a Stockholm department store, without any bodyguards of course, when a man knifed her in the chest, stomach and arm. Despite the doctors' efforts, at 5.29 the next morning she was dead.

The assassin was caught on 24 September. He was Mihailo Mihailovič, born in Sweden of Serb parents, angry with the Swedish government because it had supported NATO in Kosovo. Following various judicial bouts, and his certification as psychologically deranged, he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

After Sweden, that historical bastion of Nordic socialism, it is now the turn of Norway, the only remaining Nordic country with a social democratic government that defends progressive causes at the international level as well as defending the social State. Yet again, a lone madman has struck.

A lone madman? That claim is made mainly by the extreme Right. Because, of course, if the ideas of the extreme Right are to be safeguarded, it is vital to put as much distance as possible between the ideology propagated by its parties and the criminal acts their ideology inspires. The belief has to be fostered that fascism is an opinion, not a crime, and that the organisations of the extreme right are made up of normal, ordinary citizens. Whereas in fact, they are nurseries for Breiviks who can emerge anytime, anywhere, armed to the teeth and ready to sow death.

Shortly after the Norwegian drama, Oskar Freysinger, an extreme right-wing Swiss politician famous for opposing the construction of minarets and for stating that abortion has caused an “invisible genocide”, gave the following reply to a journalist who pointed out that a number of Breivik's standpoints matched Freysinger's own and those of his party, the Swiss People's Party: “Do you think there will be fewer terrorist attacks and madmen if I'm forced into silence? It will be worse!” That answer should be taken as a threat.

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