

Rise of the Radical Left in Norway

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Support for the radical left is growing in Norway and gives reason for optimism when it comes to mobilising for change. The radical left parties should play a leading role in building resistance from below.

The national elections in September 2021 saw an end to eight years with a right-wing, conservative government in Norway and brought to the forefront an expectation among voters for radical left politics. For too long the richest have been getting richer while the number of poor people has increased. Climate action has been talked about, with no real shift being made. The borders have been tightened even more for refugees. And even what were seen as strong abortion rights have been attacked. The majority of voters wanted change, and many wanted radical change.

The UN report on climate change announcing code red for humanity came out just a month before the elections and put its stamp on the results.¹ More than ever, people in Norway wanted a government that would take climate action seriously.

We did get a new government, but the awaited change in politics did not follow, as I will try to explain in this article. Mobilisations from below and the role of the radical left parties will be decisive in the months and years to come.

The radical left

The radical left in Norway consists of two parties: the Socialist Left Party (Sosialistisk Venstreparti, SV) and the Red Party (Rødt). The Green Party defines itself as neither to the left nor the right, but its politics for climate action as well as for refugees are definitely radical.

The Socialist Left Party has existed since 1975 and is a reformist left party that has its roots in anti-imperialism, feminism, environmental issues and the fight for kindergartens and education and against economic and social inequality. From 2005 until 2013 they were part of a coalition government with the Labour Party and the Centre Party, with the Labour Party as the biggest member of the coalition. During these years the Socialist Left Party made compromises that troubled both their voters and their members. The worst was in 2011, when they agreed to Norway's taking part in the bombardment of Libya. Being known as a party that until

then had advocated for peace and against war, this came as a shock to many, and it resulted in the loss of members and of credibility among the Left. In 2015, the national conference of the party decided on a resolution criticising the party's actions in 2011, a resolution that the leader of the party also voted for.² But their compromises when in government, as well as the bombing of Libya, still haunt the party.

The Red Party is in its everyday politics quite close to the Socialist Left Party, but it has a clear anti-capitalist platform and has been steady on its anti-war politics, winning over members from the Socialist Left Party on this issue. Being established just fifteen years ago, and with a young leadership, the Red Party is seen as a new and exciting addition to the Norwegian political scene. It grew out of the Red Electoral Alliance (Rød Valgallianse, RV), which was set up by the Maoist Workers Communist Party-Marxist Leninists (Arbeidernes kommunistiske parti – marxistleninistene, AKP-ml) in 1973. The leadership of the alliance had long denied the Stalinist past of the Workers Communist Party when they established the Red Party in 2007. Over the years several smaller groups have joined, including small Trotskyist groups as well as fractions from the Socialist Left Party. Coming up to 2022, the dominant base is reformist, but there are also revolutionary tendencies among factions whose lineage stems from the former Maoist party as well as among previous members of the International Socialists in Norway.

The Green Party has existed since 1988 and has grown in both membership and attention with the growing climate crisis. They are unconditional in their climate demands: the most important being the demand to put an end to Norwegian oil extraction by 2035. In recent years the leader of the party has also been more radical and outspoken than the two radical left parties when it comes to demanding that Norway take in many more refugees.

Labour and the radical left

Opinion polls showed that the Left would win the national elections in Norway in September 2021, with the social democratic Norwegian Labour Party as the dominating party. Knowing they would not win a majority of the seats in parliament, the party promised the voters a coalition with the Centre Party and the Socialist Left Party. The Centre Party has its historical roots in the earlier farmers' movements, and mainly campaigned against the centralisation of public services.

The Labour Party won 26 per cent of the votes, the Centre Party almost 14 per cent and the Socialist Left Party nearly 8 per cent.³ All those that were hoping for radical change with the Socialist Left Party in the new government were disappointed when the Labour Party chose to give in to the Centre Party in the negotiations and not meet the most important demands from the Socialist Left Party, who decided to break out. The main reason was that they saw no signs of effective policies when it came to reducing fossil fuel dependency and economic inequality. This meant that the Labour Party also disappointed its own youth organisation, who had said in the media that climate action was one of the main political changes they wanted from the new government.⁴

Instead of entering the coalition, the Socialist Left Party offers support when it comes to the annual state budget, and is in this way seen as more tied to the government than the Red Party. The Red Party was paid little attention by the Labour Party after the elections, seen neither as a possible coalition partner, which in any case was not an option the Red Party was looking for, nor as a budget partner. It therefore has a freer position in parliament, which it uses eagerly to put pressure on the Labour Party from the left on subjects like higher taxes for the rich, deprivatisation of welfare services, more reasonable social benefits and, at the moment, lower electricity prices.

Breakthrough for the Red Party

The Red Party made a major breakthrough in the elections and went from having one representative to having eight, which meant a doubling of their previous election results, going from getting 2.4 per cent of the vote in the elections in 2017⁵ to getting 4.7 per cent in 2021.⁶ Though the percentage is not high compared to the bigger parties, it has contributed to a shift in Norwegian politics.

In addition, both the Red Party and the Socialist Left Party have seen their membership increase significantly: the Red Party from around 10,000 members in 2020⁷ to nearly 14,000 in February 2022;⁸ the Socialist Left Party had almost 17,000 members at the end of 2021,⁹ which was around 2000 more than at the end of 2019.¹⁰ The Green Party has also grown in membership, reporting around 12,000 members in August 2021. They had a leap in membership following the UN climate report.¹¹ Given the radical climate politics of the Green Party, the increasing membership numbers of these three parties shows growing support for the radical left and for radical climate action.

In February 2022, the Red Party jumped in opinion polls, with around 10 percent of respondents supporting the party. It has gained a lot of traction mainly because it has put itself in a leading role in the fight against electricity price rises. As in other European countries, Norwegians have been struggling with soaring prices from late 2021, and it has made people angry. An important difference as compared to most other countries is that Norway is self-sufficient, utilising cheap, clean energy from hydropower. However, even though production costs are low, a privatised, market-based distribution system has made it possible for power and internet providers to sell electricity at extremely high prices.

The Red Party is confronting the inaction of the Labour Party. The leader of the party, as well as its leading members, took part in demonstrations outside parliament demanding lower electricity prices. Inside parliament, the Red Party has invited the Labour Party to cooperate in establishing a minimum price for electricity that working-class people can afford, but the Labour Party has rejected this. It has instead come up with support schemes, but as very many people know from experience this is hardly enough to help them pay their electricity bills, and it will not solve the problem in the long run. So the Red Party has been winning over supporters not only from the Labour Party but also many from the Centre Party.¹²

Oil, wealth and inequality

Norway is known for its welfare state that gives the public a security net with free health care, free education, unemployment benefits, etc. The country is also known for its oil. Just two generations ago one could find people in Norway living in deep poverty, both in the countryside as well as in the cities. After the discovery of oil in the North Sea, things changed dramatically, and the standard of living for the whole population increased from the 1970s onwards. This was possible because the oil revenues were mainly channelled back to the state instead of all going to private oil companies. At the same time, social democratic governments and strong trade unions ensured that the wealth also trickled down to the working class and that the wage gap between the classes was kept relatively low. However, in the past thirty years inequality has been growing, and during the tenure of the right-wing-conservative government the gap has grown even more.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, an image was created of Norway as being a country where people were equal and where everyone was treated equally. It was almost shameful to admit that one was earning well, whereas today the richest flash their wealth shamelessly. Being one of the richest countries in the world, it seems absurd to talk about poverty in Norway. However, in 2021 over 12 per cent of all children were living in poor families.¹³ In 2022, many more are affected and find themselves on the edge of economic collapse as the price of electricity hits the ceiling.

Social democracy is failing

It is not unique to Norway that social democracy has shifted to the right and let down the working class. We have seen the same in several other countries in Europe where social democratic governments have adopted neoliberal politics. The same has happened with the Norwegian Labour Party. It has been the dominant political party since the Second World War, but its support has dropped.

The Labour Party has taken the lead in privatising key businesses and industries such as the main oil company, Statoil, the postal service and the railway. The first of these resulted in less public control over the oil industry; the latter two resulted in the deterioration of services. Multinational corporations have been allowed to take over kindergartens and nursing homes for the elderly. Earlier in government, the Labour Party enforced so-called New Public Management in public services like hospitals, schools and in the labour and welfare services. In the last couple of years, however, they have turned against New Public Management after trade unions and public service workers have spoken out about the negative consequences.

The Red Party has taken up the fight against privatisation for years and is well known for a slogan that other parties have adopted—“Kamp mot velferdsprofitorer”—that is, “Fight against welfare profiteers.” The Socialist Left party has also taken up the fight against privatisation. Seeing that this resonates among the working class, the Labour Party is now taking some services back under public control. This shows how social democratic parties can be

moved to the left by radical left parties and pressure from the working class. Still, people in Norway who want radical politics are looking to the radical left for “the original” policies instead of seeking the “copy.”

The Labour Party is failing to deliver in other ways too, such as by not reversing tax cuts on the rich that the last government enforced. It has broken promises made during its election campaign to reverse cuts in public services and stop the centralisation of hospitals. It has also totally failed to maintain solidarity with refugees. The party is often in line with the strongly anti-immigrant Progress Party and seems to compete with them as to which is strictest. This is not well received among sections of the Labour Party and its youth organisation, who expect a more humane response towards refugees.

These are some of the main factors that have led to the Labour Party falling away and the radical left growing in strength. This does not imply that all of the people looking to the radical left are searching for radical left politics. In many ways, the Socialist Left Party and the Red Party are taking up of the traditional social democratic policies that the Labour Party stood for earlier but which they have now deserted. Anyhow, there is still a rise in support for more radical change.

Anti-capitalism

The Labour Party’s embrace of neoliberalism is not the only reason behind the rise of the radical left. There is also a growing awareness of the limitations and dangers of capitalism. Just some ten years ago we were ridiculed and even shouted at when we gave out leaflets for the Red Party. We were seen as obscure remnants of Stalinism wanting to turn things around in this country where things were going so well. Today, the Red Party can say in the main media outlets and in parliament that we are socialists and against capitalism with few outbursts of outrage or laughter. More and more people realise that capitalism’s drive for profit is ruining not only people’s lives but the planet itself.

Through its practice both in the parliament and in local elected bodies, the Red Party has shown that it takes seriously the problems that the working class encounter in everyday life; it confronts the right-wing and conservative parties, does not stay quiet about injustice and the rich getting richer, and its politicians are uncompromising. During the pandemic, the Red Party has stood up for people who have lost their jobs, demanding that they should get sufficient welfare benefits and that public money should not be given unconditionally to private businesses to get them through the pandemic.

In 2018, the only representative of the Red Party in parliament filed a no-confidence motion against the minister of justice, who was then from the Progress Party, because she had mocked the Labour Party for caring more for “Muslim terrorists” than for the security of the nation. The motion passed and she had to resign, and the Red Party won a lot of respect from people who were fed up with the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Progress Party and especially of this particular politician. This showed that with just one representative, the Red Party could shake the boat, that change is possible.

The Red Party speaks openly about how the drive for profit not only ruins services when they are privatised but is also ruining working conditions and not least the climate. Young people are growing up more insecure than their parents when it comes to knowing if they will get a job, be able to afford a place to live or have a planet to hand over to the generation after them. They are speaking more often than before about the problems with capitalism, and are looking for answers from the radical left.

Oil has to stop

Norway is one of the biggest oil and gas exporters in the world, and it follows from this that it should also take the lead in climate action by reducing and stopping all oil and gas extraction.

The Red Party’s national conference in 2021 voted against an end date to oil extraction that had previously been in the party programme. With 105 to 77 votes, the conference also voted against all wind energy, both on land and at sea, because it destroys nature and threatens fishing. These are legitimate arguments, but to say no to all wind energy is very problematic given that Norway must contribute to the global supply of green energy. This said, the Red Party has developed policies for a shift away from fossil fuel and towards promising green jobs. However, the party’s ties with trade unions in the oil industry hold it back from more radical politics for climate change, since these trade unions argue that their jobs are threatened. Their jobs are threatened anyway in the long run, because oil does not have a future. Oil workers and their unions should instead be mobilised to join climate activists and demand an end to fossil fuel and the creation of green jobs, with compensation should they become jobless if green jobs are not created fast enough.

During the pandemic, climate activism—including the school strikes against climate change—was disrupted and lost political weight. With the country opening up again there is hope that the climate movement will take to the streets again, but there is great need for it to be strengthened in workplaces and schools. The radical left parties and their youth organisations have to take seriously their responsibility outside parliament to encourage and build this movement.

Black Lives Matter and anti-racism

The Black Lives Matter movement hit Norway in the summer of 2020, as it did countries all over the world. Fifteen thousand mainly young people, including high numbers of Black and minority youths, were out on the streets of Oslo, and hundreds gathered in other cities. They made a powerful statement that has shifted the debate in Norway. It is no longer possible to claim that racism does not exist in Norway, and comments about it being a minor problem meet more resistance than before. Even after the horror of the 22nd of July, 2011, when seventy-seven people were massacred by the right-wing terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, politicians and the public debate in Norway did not take racism seriously. At the same time, there has been a lack of an anti-racist movement strong enough and broad enough to keep anti-racist activism going. But things are changing for the better.

Even before the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, there were

mobilisations in several cities and smaller places against an organisation called Stop the Islamisation of Norway (SIAN). It is run by just a handful of people, but they arrange street meetings to gather publicity and legitimacy. They have become the focus of anti-racist activists and increasingly also trade unionists, who gather for counter-demonstrations every time and anywhere that SIAN has an outdoor meeting.

The Red Party has been reluctant to put anti-racism at the forefront of its political priorities, but activists in the party have made anti-racism something that the party is now associated with. Many of the Red Party members engage in and also organise demonstrations against racist organisations when needed, and the Red Party is now counted on when there are anti-racist mobilisations going on. This shows how members can press forward change through activism.

Refugees must be welcomed

In 2015, when there was a dramatic increase in the number of refugees coming to Europe, the Socialist Left Party performed significantly better in local elections. On election night, after the results were known, the party leader specifically mentioned that the party had brought the refugee crisis into their election campaign. “We say yes to people that are fleeing. Norway is not threatened by taking in some refugees,” he said. Neither the Red Party nor the Labour Party prioritised the subject of refugees in their election campaigns. In the years after 2015, the Socialist Left party has also quietened down on this political issue, though both they and the Red Party have put forward motions in parliament on concrete issues when refugees have been facing deportation. With the Labour Party not offering any hope for change, there is even more need for both parties on the radical left to argue that Norway can take in many more refugees than the very few that the country is accepting.

Sadly, there has been, and still is, a difficult fight within the Red Party to put refugees higher up on the political agenda. Personally, I have been in many debates to get support from the leadership for press statements saying that Norway must receive 10,000 refugees from the Moria refugee camp in Greece, as well as for other similar subjects. No one disagrees about receiving refugees, but when the figures I and others suggest are considered too high, we have been met by arguments that we are not realistic, that we have to do the math before we put forward such suggestions and even that our arguments are emotional.

There has been, however, a positive change following the earlier leader of the youth organisation becoming a member of parliament after the last election. He is using his position in an exemplary way, putting refugees on the agenda. He keeps contact with activists both inside and outside the party, uses the media and social media to show how inhumane both the former and the present governments’ refugee policies are, and he takes up these issues through debates, questions and draft resolutions that he puts forward in the parliament. But the reluctance towards making refugees a prioritised subject for the Red Party is still there in leading sections of the party, and the possibility of shifting the party, as activists have done with anti-racism, is more remote.

Migrant workers and internationalism

One of the biggest disagreements I and others have with the party regards migrant workers who come to Norway due to the country being party to the European Economic Treaty, which allows European workers to move freely and seek employment. This has resulted in social dumping, with employers exploiting the migrant workers through low pay and bad working conditions. At the same time, the level of trade union organising has fallen for various reasons. Instead of arguing solely for restrictions on employers to prevent exploitation, the Red Party has focused more on restricting migrant workers trying to enter to Norway.

This comes down to the party lacking an internationalist approach and reflects its strong opposition to Norway being a member of the European Economic Area (EEA). There is no doubt that the EEA imposes policies that socialists can disagree with, but the fight against these policies should not put workers in Norway up against migrant workers. Having members in the party who argue for internationalism has been of utter importance for holding it back from becoming even more nationalistic.

Class struggle is more than economics

The politics of the Red Party when it comes to anti-racism, refugees and migrant workers follows a particular political reasoning. The argument is partly that class politics should be on top of the list for a socialist party, with class politics defined in terms of economic issues that affect the working class. Anti-racism and related issues are seen as “moral issues,” “value based issues” or “cultural politics,” and are considered something that the Red Party should not put effort into because doing so will open up room for the Progressive Party to intervene.. The other part of the argument is that there are problems which arise having less to do with refugees than with labour migration, and it is said that if the Red Party does not speak out about these problems the Progressive Party will again gain support.

The need for revolutionaries

Though the Red Party has faults, it is still the right place to be for revolutionary socialists in Norway. It is seen as the most radical left party, and consequently attracts people who are looking for radical left politics. People inspired by Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders look to the Red Party. It takes the effects of capitalism and neoliberalism on working people seriously, and puts forward policies for change. It has a position in parliament that gives it an important platform from which to speak out and pass resolutions and reforms that can make a difference in people’s lives here and now. And the leadership is clear that the party must keep in touch with the party membership and with movements outside parliament in order to survive as a radical socialist party. However, we need to step up the party’s engagement in movements originating outside.

With nearly fourteen thousand members as of February 2022, the potential for the party to take initiatives and build movements is huge. The party can push forward actions and arguments in trade unions as well as building and strengthening movements that are

desperately needed today, such as anti-war, climate action, anti-racism and pro-refugee campaigns and movements against inequality. At issue is not only a political understanding that does not prioritise these issues highly enough. There also needs to be an awareness that the party itself is not *the* movement that can take on all these fights and challenge capitalism's hold on the working class, and that the party can play a decisive role in building these fights and movements. The youth organisation also needs to develop this understanding.

Young people in junior and senior high schools have hardly met each other in the classrooms these past two years because of the pandemic, and have lost an arena for political discussions and the developing of ideas and actions. Now the youth organisations of the radical left parties have in front of them the extremely important task of building up radical awareness, action and organising in schools. The same goes for the universities and colleges where political activity had been low even before the pandemic.

At the moment, we are living through a pandemic, the danger of war in Europe, climate change, racism and growing inequality. All this calls for revolutionaries to throw themselves into politics wherever and however we can. For me, being active in the Red Party is the best I can do.

¹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/>

² <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/27br/sv-tar-selvkritikk-om-libya-krigen>

³ <https://valgresultat.no/?type=st&year=2021>

⁴ <https://www.nrk.no/norge/dette-er-aufs-krav-til-regjeringsforhandlingene-1.15672194>

⁵ <https://www.ssb.no/valg/faktaside/valg>

⁶ <https://valgresultat.no/?type=st&year=2021>

⁷ <https://roedt.no/roedt-har-fatt-10-000-medlemmer>

⁸ Number stated by the leadership at a national party meeting in February 2022.

⁹ <https://sol.no/nyheter/rekordmange-meldte-seg-inn-i-rodt-i-fjor/75102215>

¹⁰ <https://www.dagsavisen.no/nyheter/innenriks/2020/01/09/sv-satte-ny-medlemsrekord-i-fjor-venstre-og-krf-faller-videre/>

¹¹ <https://www.nationen.no/politikk/nye-medlemmer-strommer-til-mdg-venstre-star-pa-stedet-hvil/>

¹² <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/G32IV4/sp-taper-stort-til-roedt-i-ny-krisemaaling>

¹³ <https://www.ssb.no/inntekt-og-forbruk/inntekt-og-formue/artikler/barna-som-vokser-opp-i-lavinntekt>