

Building progressive alliances

by Asbjørn Wahl

The social conflict in Europe has intensified strongly over the past couple of years, in the wake of the financial crisis. The labour and trade union movement has been on the defensive ever since the neoliberal offensive started around 1980. The balance of power in our societies has thus shifted enormously over the past 30 years - from labour to capital, from democracy to market forces. Time is ripe, therefore, to fight back, to build broad social alliances and to reassess our strategies and tactics.

In this article I will take a closer look at the current situation, address the question of alliance building and particularly summarise some of the experiences we have had in building alliances in Norway. My point of departure is that social development is a question of power, social power, and strength. If we are not able to mobilise sufficient social power behind our many excellent demands, they will only end up as wishful thinking.

The current situation

The situation in Europe is going from bad to worse. Subsequent to the financial crisis, we are now facing a crisis of state financing, which is gradually turning into a deep social and political crisis. Add to this the environmental and climate crisis, and the future looks rather dramatic.

Perhaps we should have expected the financial crisis to be followed by strict regulation of financial capital and an end to the neoliberal experiments which contributed so strongly to it. However, quite the opposite has happened, neoliberals are still running the business, both politically and financially. They have even been able to win hegemony for their interpretation of the crisis. It is no longer the capitalist crisis which has led to the mess, but ordinary people who have been living beyond their means. Workers and pensioners have to foot the bill, after the financial institutions and speculators were rescued by governments. This has led to reactionary and anti-social austerity policies across Europe, including fierce attacks on trade unions as well as on wages, pensions and welfare services.

One of the reasons for this development is the weak resistance from trade unions and social forces in Europe. As long as we are not able to shift the balance of forces in soci-

ety, the neoliberals will continue their silent revolution (as EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso has characterised the current attempts to further de-democratise and take control over economic government in the EU). Already in eight of the EU member states public sector wages have been cut and collective agreements set aside through political decrees – without negotiations with trade unions concerned. While employers and governments are thus breaking completely with post-war consensus policies, many trade unions are still clinging to the illusion of a working social partnership, in which reasonable employers will be convinced by our arguments. However, this consensus was based on a particular balance of power which has shifted enormously during the neoliberal era of the past 30 years. What is going on now is therefore a fierce interest-based struggle, and every sign tells us that the confrontations will increase in strength. We are under attack, and it is a matter of urgency to fight back.

Build alliances

In order to confront the attacks, we have to reorient our unions, and to build broad social alliances to increase our strength. This is a struggle for power, and the struggle has to be political (not party political, but political in terms of addressing social development in the broad sense). The aim is to widen the social basis of our struggle. To that end, we will have to broaden the perspective of our policies and demands.

Alliances can change according to the situation and the aim of our struggle. In the current situation, in which the very foundation of our social achievements is being attacked, it is the broad social alliances which are decisive. In other words, we have to identify common interests with other groups in society. Thus, our alliance policy has to be built on class analyses and practice, not on empty rhetoric and lip service.

Firstly, we have to strengthen our unity within the trade union movement, i.e. in the working class itself, across the divides between public and private, blue collar and white collar, skilled and unskilled, workers and profes-

sionals, employed and unemployed, male and female, immigrants and domestically based, as well as formal and informal workers. Secondly, we should build alliances between social classes and strata, like with important parts of the middle class, of peasants, of youth and of women who can be mobilised in favour of social protection and progress. Thirdly, progressive academics and researchers, NGOs and organisations and campaigns which have an understanding of the broader social context are important social allies. Fourthly, and finally, due to the alarming climate crisis, we should seek alliances with those parts of the environmental movement which have an understanding of the social conflict and social justice.

Norwegian experiences

In Norway we have been building alliances between trade unions and other organisations and movements for many years. The one I have been in charge of, the Campaign for the Welfare State, was initiated in 1999, by six trade unions in the public sector. Gradually we grew, firstly inside the trade union movement, but then also among other organisations, such as of retired people, peasants, socially excluded people, users of welfare services, women and students. All in all we gathered organisations with more than one million members, which is not bad in a country with only approximately five million inhabitants. Of course there are different levels of participation among these organisations, but even the support from the more passive ones has given us a lot in terms of legitimacy in the social struggle.

During the general election in 2005 this alliance, in cooperation with other organisations and the broad trade union movement, succeeded in changing the political situation in Norway. It was a favourable climate for change because the existing centre-right government was highly unpopular due to its policies of privatisation and deregulation. Further, the Labour Party had been strongly punished by the voters four years earlier, when it achieved the lowest support in an election since 1924, because of its move to the right. This gave us an opportunity to push the Labour Party to the left and into a coalition with the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party. Due to this pressure, all the three parties campaigned on an anti-privatisation platform, won the election, and formed a government based on the most progressive political platform in Europe.

More independent – more political

We can identify four main pillars which contributed to this success:

1. Focus on alternative analyses – a system critical view of current developments.
2. The building of new, broad and untraditional alliances.
3. The development of concrete alternatives to privatisation and marketisation.
4. The development of trade unions as independent political actors.

These steps contributed to polarising the struggle between the Right and the Left, something which gave people clear political alternatives and helped mobilise them for progressive change.

The 2005 red-green government in Norway started off by carrying through a number of progressive policies. However, as time went by, and the pressure from the movement declined, the government began to slide back to old political positions. Even if great parts of the trade union movement politically had become more independent from the Labour Party, other parts were still too loyal to oppose and to keep up the pressure when welfare provisions were weakened and undermined by 'their own' government. It is exactly the move to the right of the traditional Social Democratic/Socialist Parties which has made it necessary for trade unions in the current situation to become more independent politically and to take on a wider political responsibility and, not least, to keep up the pressure on the government after it has won the election and taken power.

So far we have only seen the beginning of the social and political crisis in Europe. In other words, it is time for trade unions which are old-fashioned, afraid of new alliances, afraid of losing control, more or less married to social democratic/socialist parties and locked in by an uninhibited belief in social partnership, to reassess their position. Social resistance to the austerity policies is increasing across Europe, but there is a lack of European coordination and leadership. We have to support those who struggle and follow their example. We have to turn the defensive into an offensive. It is all about power, not only addressing power, but taking power, if we are to stop the current development towards an ever more authoritarian and anti-social Europe.

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