

## **Main d'œuvre et développement: Que retenir du modèle nordique?**

Asbjørn Wahl

### *Résumé*

*Cet article examine l'État providence tel qu'il s'est développé au cours du dernier demi-siècle, particulièrement dans les pays scandinaves. L'auteur fait valoir que ceci représente plutôt le résultat d'une évolution historique spécifique au vingtième siècle qu'une partie intégrante d'une progression générale vers le développement. Elle ne peut donc être reproduite. L'État providence, sous forme d'un capitalisme bien réglementé, n'était pas l'objectif premier du mouvement ouvrier dans les pays du Nord, mais plutôt le résultat d'un pacte social entre capital et main d'œuvre. De nos jours, le capital s'est plus ou moins retiré de ce pacte et a commencé à attaquer et à saper les réussites acquises durant les années de l'État providence, augmentant de ce fait la pauvreté et élargissant l'écart entre riches et pauvres. Un mouvement syndical dépolitisé et dé-radicalisé a été acculé à la défensive. L'auteur en conclut que le principal objectif du mouvement ouvrier d'aujourd'hui, au Nord comme au Sud, doit donc être de limiter le pouvoir du capital et de soumettre l'économie à un contrôle démocratique. Ce résultat ne se produira pas par le dialogue social et la coopération tri-partite, mais bien par la lutte des classes et la confrontation sociale.*

## **Labour and Development: What can be Learned from the Nordic Model?**

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### *Abstract*

*This article examines the welfare state as it developed over the last half century, particularly in Scandinavian countries. The author argues that, rather than being part of a general road to development, it was the result of a very specific historic development in the twentieth century which cannot be replicated. The welfare state, in the form of regulated capitalism, was not labour's original objective in countries of the North, but was the result of a social pact between capital and labour. Today, capital has more or less withdrawn from this pact and has started to attack and undermine achievements won during the years of the welfare state, causing an increase in poverty and a widening gap between rich and poor. A depoliticized and deradicalized trade union movement has been pushed onto the defensive. The author concludes the main objective of the labour movement today, in the North as well as in the South, must therefore be to limit the power of capital and to subject the economy to democratic control. This will not occur through social dialogue and tri-partite cooperation, but through class struggle and social confrontation.*

### **Introduction**

There is a lot of heated discussion on the welfare state, or the *European Social Model*<sup>2</sup> as it is often referred to in Europe. In my part of the world we call it the *Nordic Model*, which by people throughout the world is being considered the most advanced version of this social model.

The welfare state represented great progress in terms of living and working conditions, unprecedented in the history of mankind. Public health, life expectancy and social security improved enormously over a short period of time as the welfare state developed in the last century. It, therefore, became enormously popular among ordinary people.

In the current era of neoliberal hegemony, however, the welfare state is being attacked by strong political and economic

forces in society. Deregulation of the economy, privatization and cuts in public budgets contribute to changing the specific power relations which were decisive for the development of the welfare state. Its very existence is thereby put at risk.

There is, however, a lack of analysis and focus in public debate on what made the welfare state possible. The entire question is being depoliticized. This makes it possible even for those who attack social institutions and provisions to argue that it is done in order to modernize the welfare state and to defend and protect it for future generations.

We are also experiencing that many labour organizations in the South as well as left-leaning politicians (e.g. President Lula in Brazil) are interested in *importing* this model to their countries. Trade unions and political parties, particularly social democratic parties, of the North are just as eager to *export* their successful social model, and they use a lot of resources to transfer their experiences to the South. Social peace, tri-partite cooperation and social dialogue are being promoted as central to achieving the welfare state.

This article will challenge these rather simplistic concepts of the welfare state. This social model which developed in a very specific historic context cannot be assessed independently from its social and historical origins and the power relations which made it possible. If we really want to fully understand the potential, the actual development and the perception of the welfare state, a deeper and more thorough analysis and understanding of this particular social model is crucial.

### **The Political Economy of the Welfare State**

Some types of social services (health, education, social protection, etc.) will develop in all countries as the economy develops. The economy itself demands a lot in terms of the reproduction of labour, qualifications, public transport and so on. The organizational form, quality and level of these services, however, will reflect power relations nationally as well as internationally.

Democratically managed, universally accessible public services, as opposed to profit-driven private service markets, are a question of structural power – of economic, social and political power relations in society. The welfare state is thus the result of social struggles. High quality public health services, national insurance schemes, social security and other public services were

introduced and improved as a result of the increasing power of organized labour. Public ownership and control of the basic infrastructure in society, of the utilities, represent an important part of these new power relations.

However, the welfare state as we know it was not only a product of power relations in general, but the result of a very specific historic development in the twentieth century, including the Russian revolution. Contrary to being the result of social dialogue and tri-partite cooperation, as many in the labour movement would suggest, the welfare state was the result of a long period of intense social struggle and class confrontations.

Ever since capitalism became the dominant mode of production in our societies, it has developed in cycles from boom to bust and from bust to boom. The relatively unregulated *laissez-faire* capitalism of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century created heavy exploitation of workers in general, and caused extraordinary misery during its bust periods. The response of the working class became to organize and fight – at the workplaces as well as at the political level. Through this fight the labour movement gradually achieved better wages, better working conditions as well as high quality social welfare provisions.

This period was thus strongly dominated by social confrontations. There were general strikes and lock-outs. Police and military forces were used against striking workers, even in the Scandinavian countries. People were wounded and killed in these confrontations. As labour organizations developed and became stronger, they gradually gained ground in the social struggle. A large part of the movement turned politically to socialism as a means to end capitalist exploitation. Demands for systemic changes became prevalent.

The international economic depression of the 1930s, in particular, led to increased popular pressure for political interventions in the markets. Mass unemployment, increased misery, fascism and war produced widespread demands for peace, social security, full employment and political control of the economy. When the leaders of the victorious nations met at the Bretton Woods conference towards the end of World War II (WWII), therefore, the message from their workers and citizens back home was clear: unregulated, crisis-stricken capitalism must come to an end. Under the existing balance of power, it became the Keynes-

ian model of regulated capitalism which won hegemony, and thus, the social and economic foundation for the welfare state was created.

It is important to notice that the strength of labour did not only result in better trade union rights and regulated labour markets. Much more important was the general taming of market forces. The power of capital was reduced in favour of politically elected bodies. Market activity was restricted through political interventions in the market. Capital control was introduced and financial capital became strictly regulated. Through a strong expansion of the public sector and the welfare state, a significant part of the economy was taken out of the market altogether and made subject to political decisions. This general taming of market forces was a precondition for the development of the welfare state, and the resulting comprehensive regulatory framework became more important than labour legislation in providing better working conditions.<sup>3</sup>

The welfare state, in other words, is not only a sum of social institutions and public budgets. It represents first and foremost specific power relations in society.<sup>4</sup> Capital control, in particular, made it possible for governments to pursue a policy of national and social development without continually being confronted with capital's exit strategies where big corporations threatened to pull out and move to other countries with more favourable conditions if their interests were threatened. So, in short, public welfare is a question of power!

### **The Social Pact**

An important part of the history of the welfare state as well as of the balance of power in society is the social pact or the class compromise. As there is no room for a comprehensive analysis here, I will only focus on some key elements of this specific historic development. During the last century, the social struggle between labour and capital in many countries turned into static warfare in which none of the parties were very successful in advancing their positions. The labour movement was not able to capture new power positions and capital forces were not able to defeat the workers' organizations. As a result of this, the trade union movement gradually developed a sort of peaceful cohabitation with capitalist interests.

In the 1930s this cohabitation started to become institu-

tionalized in some parts of Europe when the trade union movement struck accords with employers' organizations, particularly in the North, as well as in most of Western Europe after WWII. After a period characterized by intense confrontations between labour and capital, societies entered a phase of social peace, bi- and tripartite negotiations and consensus policies. It was the balance of power within the framework of this social pact between labour and capital which formed the basis on which the welfare state was developed – and working and living conditions as well as social provisions were gradually improved.

An important factor in the expansion of the welfare state in the post WWII era was that international capitalism experienced more than 20 years of stable and strong economic growth. This made it easier to share the dividends between labour, capital and the public sector.

It is important to realize that this social partnership which emerged between labour and capital was a result of the actual strength of the trade union and the labour movement. The employers and their organizations realized that they were not able to defeat the trade unions. They had to recognize the unions as representatives of the workers and negotiate with them. The peaceful cohabitation between labour and capital rested, in other words, on a strong labour movement – a strength which was developed exactly through the many struggles and confrontations between labour and capital in the previous period.

An important feature of this context was the existence of a competing economic system in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. As the British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1994) points out, this was instrumental in forcing the capitalists in the West to accept a compromise. It is also important to note that the welfare state, in the form of regulated capitalism, was never the original intention of the labour movement before it was created. The stated aim was socialism. It was in fear of socialism (after the Russian revolution and a strengthening and radicalization of the labour movement in Western Europe during WWII) that capital owners in Western Europe gave in to many of the demands of the labour movement. They voluntarily entered into social pacts and relented to many of labour's social and economic demands in order to gain time and reduce socialist sentiments in the labour movement. Fifty years later we can state that this corporate strategy proved to be quite successful.

The fact that the welfare state was not the expressed aim of the labour movement, but the result of the specific historic compromise between labour and capital, is also reflected in the mixed characteristics of the welfare state. On one hand, parts of it represent the seeds of the labour movement's vision of another and better society (social insurance, child benefits, redistribution, free welfare services, universal rights). On the other hand, other parts of the welfare state function more like a repair workshop of a brutal and inhumane economic system, where deficiencies are being compensated. Unemployment benefits and different pension-schemes and benefits, for example, have been linked to problems such as work-related disabilities, occupational health problems and labour market exclusions.

We should also keep in mind that there were ideological and political struggles that occurred within the labour movement along the way. The more radical or revolutionary currents wanted to socialize, or democratize the ownership of the means of production, while the more moderate or reformist currents promoted delimiting the power of capital through political regulation and reforms. It was precisely the strength of the more radical currents that made capitalist forces accept a class compromise in Western Europe. The Soviet Union played an important role in this regard due to the fact that capital owners in Western Europe feared that if a confrontation over state power should arise in Western European countries the Soviet Union would support the more radical currents.<sup>5</sup>

In any case, the policy of the social pact, which in reality became the development of the welfare state, resulted in enormous improvements in living and working conditions. In the labour movement this led to the common understanding that a path had been found to a society which brought social progress and a relatively fair distribution of wealth to ordinary people – without necessitating all the sacrifices connected with class struggle and social confrontations. Settlements between labour and capital were made in rather orderly and peaceful ways at the national level. The dominant consensus was that society had reached a higher level of civilization.

Through gradual reforms the labour movement had increased democratic control of the economy. The crisis-free capitalism had become a reality! No more economic crises like that of the 1930s, no more mass unemployment, no more social distress,

no more concentration of wealth among the rich and privileged, no more misery among people. All social trends pointed upwards. For a great many in the labour movement this was the reformist road to socialism – and it was for everybody to see that it worked! These social achievements formed the material basis for a social partnership ideology which became, and still is, deeply rooted in the national and European labour movement.

For the trade union movement the social pact in reality represented the acceptance of the capitalist organization of production, the private ownership of the means of production and the employers' right to lead the labour process.<sup>6</sup> In exchange for gains in terms of welfare and working conditions, the trade union confederations guaranteed industrial peace and restraint in wage negotiations. Simplistically, the welfare state and the gradually improved living conditions were what the rather peaceful labour movement achieved in exchange for giving up its socialist project. Today we can conclude that it was a short-term achievement in a very specific historical context.

Now, more than 50 years later, we have to admit that the capitalists to a large degree have succeeded with their strategy. Due to important achievements in terms of welfare, wages and working conditions, the social pact gained massive support from the working class, and the more radical and anti-capitalist segments of the labour movement were gradually marginalized. The dominant parts of the labour movement also started to see the social progress as the result of social peace and cooperation with more civilized capital owners. To many of the trade union leaders of the time, social confrontations actually became regarded as negative activities which had adverse effects on workers' conditions and therefore should be avoided. Combined with the dominant perception that free-market capitalism was defeated, this development led to the depoliticization and deradicalization of the labour movement and the bureaucratization of the trade union movement. It became the historic role of the social democratic parties to administer this policy of class compromise.

What the ideology of the social pact fails to explain is that the great achievements in terms of welfare and better working conditions during the era of the class compromise after WWII represented a harvesting period. This was made possible only because great parts of the working class had been able to shift the balance of power between labour and capital through a number of



confrontations and difficult class struggles during the first part of the twentieth century (including the Russian revolution). It was, in other words, the confrontational struggles of the previous period, as well as the still existing organizational strength, which made it possible for the trade unionists of the social partnership era to achieve what they did through peaceful negotiations. Thus, we face the paradoxical situation that the ideology of the social pact, which also became the ideology of the welfare state, in the long run undermined the power structure on which the same welfare state was developed!

### **The Turning Point: The Neoliberal Offensive**

As the reconstruction and rebuilding of the economy after WWII came to an end, the post-war Keynesian economic model ran into increasing problems. Stagnation, inflation and profit crises became prevalent. Spurred by these international economic crises, market forces went on the offensive and the current era of neoliberalism started. The politics of the social pact thus continued throughout the 1970s. After that, the capitalist forces changed their strategy in order to restore profitability, withdrawing gradually from the social pact and introducing more confrontational policies in regard to labour.

The political and ideological hegemony which the capitalist forces then were able to obtain in a very short period of time has been used to carry out a quick and systematic project of deregulation. Results have included increased market competition and attacks on wages, labour laws, agreements and power positions which were won during the era of the welfare economy, and which at that time were accepted by the employers as part of the class compromise. Through political pressure, threats of pulling out of the domestic market or speculative attacks on currencies, capitalist owners go far towards influencing government policies and promoting cuts in public budgets – i.e. the economy of the welfare state.

Many of the complex system of regulatory measures which were used to control market forces and thus to create the preconditions for the development of the welfare state have been gradually dismantled. This policy of deregulation has led to the development of a deregulated, speculative economy, in which more than 90 per cent of international, economic transactions are speculative, most of which are currency speculation. An unprece-

mented redistribution of wealth has also occurred— from public to private, from labour to capital and from the poor to the rich. Public as well as private poverty is growing alongside an ever more visible private abundance of wealth among the elite. The redistribution model of the welfare state has, in other words, been turned upside down.

An important part of the strategy of capital has been the restructuring of capitalist production at the global level. Global production chains, lean production, outsourcing, offshoring and relocation of assembly lines as well as of supportive services are central features of this development. Workers and social models are being played out against each other as a result of this more and more unlimited freedom of movement of capital, goods and services. New Public Management has introduced private sector models in the public sector as well. Market freedom and the ability to compete on increasingly deregulated international markets have been the guiding principles behind the actual policies. As a result, competition is increasing in the labour market and a rapid growth of precarious work is undermining trade union and workers' rights. A widespread *brutalization of work*<sup>7</sup> is one of the more serious adverse effects of this development.

This capitalist offensive did not meet much resistance. The labour movement was not very well prepared for the new economic and social situation. The trade unions had difficulties acting under the changed economic and social conditions as their policies and activities were mainly linked to their experiences in a period of economic prosperity. In addition, the process of depoliticization and deradicalization, which had taken place during the era of the social pact, made it easier for capital owners to try to *solve* the crisis by attacking working conditions, trade union and workers' rights, public services and social rights and provisions.

What we have been facing over the last twenty years is, therefore, the abolition of capital control, the deregulation and liberalization of markets, the redistribution and concentration of wealth, the privatization of public services, the increased use of competitive tendering and outsourcing, the downsizing of the workforce to the absolute minimum and the consequent increasing labour intensity, and the flexibilization of labour markets. In this way, most of the economic and material basis on which the welfare state was developed is simply gone.

It is not an accidental setback we are facing, but a funda-

mental change in the development of our societies. Behind the massive shift in the balance of power in society, which we have experienced over the last couple of decades, we can identify some strong economic and political forces. *Globalization* is not a necessary consequence of technological and organizational changes, as some would suggest, but rather a result of strategic and political decisions in the closed boardrooms of multinational companies, in financial institutions and by governments.

Through informal and unaccountable power structures like the G8, institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO), regional institutions like the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other bilateral and regional trade agreements, neoliberal policies are being pushed through and institutionalized internationally. In short, an immense shift in the balance of power between labour and capital has taken place, and this time in favour of capital. The big multinational companies have been at the forefront of this development – with their newly achieved freedom from democratic regulation and control.

The fact that the power basis of the welfare state is eroding does not, of course, mean that we can risk ending up in a pre-welfare state situation, where social spending constituted a considerable smaller part of GDP than today (Lindert, 2004: 11). Society has developed a lot since then, and the current economy is completely dependent on a number of social and public services. It is, therefore, not only the size of the public sector that is significant in this regard, but also, and even more importantly, the power relations within it.

The undermining and weakening of the welfare state will first and foremost be reflected in the organizational forms, the stratification, the quality and the level of the social services through such things as privatization, increased use of competitive tendering, increased poverty and inequality in society, more and higher user fees, the transition from universal services to means testing and the increased commodification of labour (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 35). Due to strengthened market forces, many people will also experience reduced access to decent housing, deteriorating working conditions and health services.

Based on the above, we can conclude that the weakening and deconstruction of the welfare state is occurring, but the po-

tential of the new power relations is not exhausted. Institutional slowness, the existence of universal suffrage and democratic institutions, although weakened, and sporadic social resistance slow down the speed of the process of deconstruction. Whether or not this development will be allowed to continue will therefore depend on the breadth and strength of the social resistance which will be mobilized in defence of the achievements which were won through the welfare state – and subsequently abandoned for more offensive social and political aims.

### **The Shift From Consensus to Confrontation**

The fact that the relatively stable class compromise in the post WWII period has broken down, and the capitalist forces are withdrawing from the social pact, does also imply that the consensus policies of the social pact are gradually being replaced by confrontational attacks. In other words, bi- and tripartite negotiations, or *social dialogue* which it is now being called in the European Union, do not work the same way it did during the social pact period.

The trade union movement was taken by surprise by this development. The shift from consensus to confrontation on the side of capital was incomprehensible within the consensus-oriented social pact ideology of the labour movement. The breakdown of the historic compromise therefore also led to a political and ideological crisis in the social democratic parties and in most of the labour movement. With a depoliticized and passive membership, and an increasingly self-recruiting leadership which was moving into the elite of society, social democratic parties rapidly adapted to the dominant neoliberal agenda, although in the form of softer alternatives to the original right-wing version.

In this context, globalization, rather than be the concrete form of the current neoliberal offensive, became interpreted as a *necessary* phase of development of the new world economy. *Globalization has come to stay* has been the mantra of dominant parts of the labour movement. Larger parts of the trade union movement in developed countries have therefore also come out in favour of a narrowly focused policy to strengthen the international competitiveness of *their own* companies (*business unionism*). Increased *flexibility*, including in its new, dressed up version *flexicurity*, which means the weakening of working conditions and labour regulations, has been accepted in the name of *in-*

*creased competitiveness*. Competitiveness, in this way, is being launched as the one and only way to secure jobs.

Deregulation and liberalization of the economy in general have also been widely accepted, provided it was accompanied by labour standards (or *social clauses*). Thus, a focus on real power relations and limitation of market forces through enforceable regulations have been replaced by a sort of legal formalism – both at the national level, within the European Union and in international institutions like the WTO and the World Bank. An entire academic industry focusing on corporate social responsibility (CSR), in the form of voluntary ethical standards, has emerged in this vacuum created by the crumbling power of trade unions and social movements – and with an army of well financed and well intentioned NGOs and research groups to produce this ideological smokescreen over the immense shift in power relations in favour of capitalist interests, which is going on in the real world.

Policies such as CSR do not aim to fight the liberalization of the economy itself, but *the negative effects of liberalization on the workers*. However, liberalization without negative effects on workers does not exist. It is the liberalization process which is the problem. If trade unions and social movements want to reduce the negative effects of liberalization, they will therefore have to fight liberalization itself, since liberalization means deregulation and privatization, which exactly represent the way the on-going, enormous shift in the balance of power in society is carried out.

This process of liberalization is one of the most important experiences the short history of the welfare state has given us. A lot of the regulations which we have in society today have been introduced as a result of social and trade union struggles to protect workers, women, children and the environment from the excesses of free market capitalism. The great social progress which we experienced in the era of the welfare state was achieved precisely through regulations. Workers secured their interests and gained more power and influence through regulation and through increased public ownership. Regulation in this regard requires laws and rules which delimit the power of capital and market forces and at the same time give more power to democratically elected bodies as well as to employees and trade unions. Liberalization ensures that these instruments for democracy, social protection and trade union and workers' power are being scrapped and abolished.

The rather narrow focus on CSR and social dialogue will, therefore, do nothing but lead the struggle astray. Demands for a new class compromise, obviously with a nostalgic hope that the social peace and the gradual improvement of social conditions of the 1960s should be restored, do not have any realistic place under the current balance of power. The social forces which want to defend public services and gains of the welfare state will, therefore, have to meet the confrontational attacks from the capitalist forces with a counter offensive. Whether one likes it or not, the reality is that social relations are shifting from consensus to confrontation. The labour movement had rather be prepared.

### **The Brutalization of Work**

One important effect of the new balance of power is a serious brutalization of work. An increasing number of workers are being excluded from the labour market through being declared unable to work. We are experiencing record-high numbers of sick leaves, as well as an increase in occupational injuries and accidents. A growing number of workers are experiencing increasing stress and so-called chronic fatigue syndrome at the work place. In many industries and sectors, workers are also experiencing degradation of work, with less control over the work process. In short, there are many signs that something dramatic is about to happen to our labour market and to our entire relationship to work.

In recent years many people have, therefore, experienced that work pressure has become tougher, that labour laws and agreements are often undermined and unenforced in daily work and that insecurity and uncertainty have increased. A rapidly growing number of workers are being excluded from the labour market altogether. In Norway, almost 15 per cent of the total population between the ages of 16 and 67 – the latter being the ordinary age of retirement – are now on early retirement, disablement benefits or some kind of rehabilitation. The figure has doubled over the last 20 years. At the same time, trade union and labour rights are being weakened and undermined. There is no doubt, then, that a serious brutalization of work is going on.

The trend toward the increasing brutalization of work represents a serious break with developments during the golden years of the welfare economy. At that time we, at least in the industrialized world, for a long period experienced a gradual im-

provement of working conditions – a development which included reduced competition, shorter and better regulated working hours, longer annual leave, improved job security, the introduction and improvement of sick pay, a reduction in work intensity, less stress, the elimination of many health hazardous workplaces, and the development of gradually better working environmental legislation. This developed alongside a high level of employment, improved trade union rights, increasing co-determination in the workplace and in the companies.

Even with these positive changes in the work force we did have an ideal working environment. Far from that, there were many problems and challenges ahead. What it indicates is that we had experienced positive development. Working conditions and working environments were gradually being improved. That is no longer the general trend. The shift in development is so formidable that workers' human dignity is being heavily attacked.

Particularly, new management methods, new work processes, new organizational structures and increased market competition have had immense effects on working conditions and workers' health. The Australian professor Michael Quinlan went through 29 different reports about the effect of outsourcing and competition in both the private and public sectors. His conclusion was clear (referred to in the Norwegian daily newspaper *Klassekampen* on June 30, 2001 – my translation):

*-Completely independent of the different research methods that are used, the results go overwhelmingly in the same direction. Outsourcing affects the health, says Michael Quinlan. (...) 23 of the 29 studies of outsourcing show that injury, stress and other health problems increase. None of those show health improvements at any point. (...)*

*-We can without doubt conclude with overwhelming evidence that the new work regime worsens people's health. The result is anything from deaths to dangerous situations and increased psychological stress, he says.*

The increased worker exclusion from the labour market, however, is not necessarily and not only a result of the deterioration of workers' health. The Norwegian health authorities state that there is no identifiable deterioration of public health in Norway. Health problems and disabilities are relative and dependent

on how societies and workplaces have adjusted to accommodate different people's needs. The problem of increased exclusion from the labour market is, therefore, first and foremost related to growing demands at work. Workers are being excluded at an earlier stage than before. Due to increased competition, more rapid restructuring of companies and public undertakings and changing working relations, less control over the work process and more precarious work, the demand on workers is becoming more and more intolerable. At the same time, research and experience prove that measures taken by politicians and public authorities to stop and reduce this exclusion from the labour market have failed all over Europe, as proved by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (referred to in the Norwegian trade union newsletter *Lonytt*, 05.02.2001).

This is not a big surprise. If you do not analyze – or if you even deny the existence of – the power structures and the driving forces which lay behind the ongoing brutalization of work, you will never succeed in fighting it. There are causes and there are effects, and if you want to influence the effects, you will have to attack the causes. That is not being done by our politicians and public authorities today. They are scratching the surface and attacking the symptoms rather than the causes – and their results have been in vain. On the contrary, through their welfare-to-work policies and their attacks on sick pay and social benefits they are propagating a climate of suspicion, disgrace and humiliation. They are individualizing and privatizing serious social problems. Workers are made to believe that it is their own problem that they are being excluded from the labour market. 'It is me who is not good enough and cannot master the new demands in the labour market'.

The increasing gap between rich and poor in society is adding to these adverse effects on peoples' health and well-being. Professor Vicente Navarro concludes that the growing inequalities we are witnessing in the world today are having a very negative impact on the health and quality of life of its populations. He argues that it is the inequality itself which is bad such as the distance among social groups and individuals and the lack of social cohesion that this distance creates (Navarro, 2004: 26). In other words, as neoliberal policies increase the poverty gap, and as increased inequalities lead to health problems, we can conclude that neoliberal globalization is a health hazard.



The ideology of the social pact is neither able to explain nor to develop counter-strategies against this development. Under the welfare economy there were direct inter-links between economic growth and better living and working conditions. These links are no longer there – the economy grows, but it leads to setbacks rather than to progress. The entire concept of the welfare state is breaking down.

### **What Went Wrong?**

The welfare state, particularly the Nordic model, represented enormous social progress for the great majority of people in society. So, what went wrong, then? Why is something, which, in spite of its weaknesses, can be characterized as one of the most successful social models in the history of mankind now being attacked and undermined? Here is a summary of the most important reasons:

Firstly, the social pact was not a stable situation. It was a compromise in a concrete and very specific historical situation, and the main economic and social characteristics of the capitalist system were still in tact. Secondly, something which could have been considered an important short term tactical compromise from the point of view of the labour movement became the long term, strategic aim. Rather than be seen as a step towards a more fundamental social emancipation, the class compromise, and its offspring, the welfare state, gradually became the *end of history*. Thirdly, and linked to the previous point, the ideology of the social pact proved wrong. The democratic control of the economy was never fully achieved, the crises-free capitalism was not created, and the class struggle was not over. Fourthly, the labour movement was taken by surprise by the neoliberal offensive. Rather than mobilize socially to defend the achievements which were won through the welfare state and move the social struggle forward, a great number of the leaders of the trade union and the labour movement were forced on the defensive, clung to the social peace and social dialogue model, negotiated concessions and adopted a surprisingly big portion of the neoliberal ideology themselves.

There is no reason why we should moralize over these developments. Neither conspiracy theories nor blame-games are particularly productive in this regard. There are reasons why this happened and it is possible to comprehend the political and ideo-

logical effects of the very specific historic developments. The important thing is to analyze and to try to understand the reasons for the social and political backlash which the labour movement is currently experiencing, and, especially, to learn from them, and act accordingly.

### **The Need to go Beyond Keynesianism**

The most important lesson learned from the history of the welfare state as we see it develop today, is that it did not go far enough in democratizing the economy. One of the most successful effects of the welfare state has been the redistribution of income in society. The basic relations of capitalist production prevailed however. The high concentration of the ownership of capital and of the means of production thus formed a strong power basis on which an attack on the more equal distribution of goods and services in welfare societies could be launched. This is exactly what we are witnessing today, in the form of an on-going global neoliberal offensive.

A new social model will, therefore, have to go beyond the Keynesian welfare state. Emancipatory social policies will presuppose a more fundamental shift in the balance of power in society. To achieve that, we have to understand and to focus more strongly on power – and ownership. It is not a question of good intentions, good will or high morale (or corporate social responsibility, as some refer to it), but of power relations, of the balance of power between labour and capital, between market forces and civil society.

In order to, in the long run, fight for another social model in the interest of the great majority in society, we will therefore have to confront the economic, political and social interests who stand behind the attacks on public services and the welfare state. Power structures and power relations will have to be changed. Structural reforms like a currency exchange tax, regulation of capital flows, increased taxation of multinational companies, local control of natural resources, and progressively increased democratic control of the economy should therefore be the starting point and the direction of the struggles which have to come.

### **Growing Resistance**

After initial setbacks, political and ideological confusion and a number of isolated and lost struggles during the 1980s and

1990s, today we can see growing resistance against the existing neoliberal economic and social order. While a lot of people were persuaded by the many promises of a bright future if market forces could be freed from their regulations and chains, more and more people are now experiencing in practise that the neoliberal project does not deliver. Both neoliberalism and its global institutions are therefore increasingly being drawn into a crisis of legitimacy.

Power breeds counter-power – and this is all about power. Time is ripe to confront neoliberalism and the increased power of capital head on. There is no other way to stop the existing model of development than by once again mobilizing broad movements from below. Ever more people have begun to realize that the so-called globalization of the economy not only represents capital on the offensive, but also capital's weaknesses, its vulnerability, vulgarity and internal contradictions. Hand in hand with the growing resistance against corporate globalization, we therefore also are experiencing an increasing globalization of the resistance.

Increasing numbers of unveiled attacks on welfare and social provisions from multinational corporations, governments and international financial institutions provoke social resistance on a growing scale. In many countries we can see a revitalization of the trade union movement. New and non-traditional national and international coalitions are being developed between trade unions, social movements and NGOs. The new global justice and solidarity movement, which has proven itself able to gather more than one hundred thousand people at social forums and mobilize millions of people in the streets, has produced optimism and confidence that another future is possible.

An increasing number of trade unionists are experiencing that the narrow focus on CSR and social dialogue in the trade union movement does not deliver as expected, and that a much wider and system-critical perspective is necessary. The growing realization that labour standards cannot offset the adverse effects of privatization and deregulation contributes to creating stronger opposition to the policy of liberalization itself. Successful struggles against privatization, so-called public-private partnerships (PPP), deregulation and other expressions of neoliberal policies in many countries are strengthening self-confidence and a new belief in social mobilization as a way forward. Currently, the most

encouraging developments can be seen in Latin-America, where strong social movements have been able to win national elections in declared opposition to neoliberal policies.

### **The Immediate Tasks**

The following are some of the most important, immediate tasks facing the labour movement:

#### *Defend the Achievements Won Through the Welfare State*

This is our first line of defence. It is a defensive struggle, and we have to realize that we are in a defensive situation. This means we have to fight privatization, deregulation and attacks on our social security provisions, to oppose the undermining of the universal social systems which have been developed in many countries and to prevent them from being replaced by means testing and other humiliating needs tests. It also includes fighting for a financing model which is based on a progressive taxation on the *haves* rather than on individual user fees for the *have nots*.

#### *Confront the Institutionalization of Neoliberalism at the International Level*

An important part of the neoliberal strategy is the attempt to institutionalize its policies at the transnational level. In this way, the interests behind these market-oriented solutions are able to avoid and overrule democratic structures and processes at the local and national levels. Markets are thus being forced open through legislation at the EU level (the Services Directive being one of the most recent), or through agreements within international institutions like the WTO. The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) is, as an example, being used not only to give market competition priority over social or environmental regulation, but also to make this kind of privatization and deregulation irreversible. Broad international networks of social movements and NGOs have been developed to mobilize against such corporate trade and investment policies. The Our World Is Not For Sale network (OWINFS)<sup>8</sup> is the most important one, and should be supported by all who want to defend the achievements of the welfare state.

*Democratize and Further Develop our Social Services/  
Institutions in a User/Producer Alliance*

Although popular support of public services is broad and comprehensive, there is also widespread discontent with many aspects of them, such as limited accessibility, bureaucratic structures, lower than expected quality. Under-financing in order to weaken and discredit public services to pave the way for future privatization is a well-known strategy from neoliberal politicians. It is important not to deny or explain away these deficiencies, but to admit to them, to correct them and to develop a policy for further improvement of them in terms of quality, user influence and accessibility. Democratic and organizational reforms are effective in this regard and can, if successfully managed, work as strengthened barriers against privatization and political attacks in the future.<sup>9</sup> The development of social and political alliances between the users of the actual public services and those who produce them is of great strategic importance for the more decisive social struggle which has to come.

While all these immediate struggles are important in their own right, they must all the same be developed in a way which strengthens our more long-term, strategic aims. Our concrete demands and struggles should therefore:

- contribute to shifting the balance of power from capital to labour and from market forces to civil society.
- be linked to the experiences, the problems and the interests of the social groups in question, since this is a precondition for effective mobilization.
- contribute to building the broad social alliances which are necessary to win social power.

A considerable shift in the balance of power can only be achieved through a broad interest-based mobilization of trade unions, social movements and other popular organizations and NGOs, which are strong enough to confront the corporate interests and push them on the defensive. An ever broader part of our societies are the victims of the current neoliberal offensive, and it is exactly these affected social groups which will have to be united in new non-traditional alliances.

In particular, it is important to develop the alliance between the trade union movement and the new global justice and solidarity movement which has developed over the last few years. Even though its knowledge of class relations is rather poor, this

movement has been decisive in revitalizing popular resistance and has – with its dynamism, its insistence on independence and democratic control from below, its radicalism and its militancy – raised hope and inspiration. These characteristics could also contribute constructively to the revitalization of many old-fashioned and bureaucratic trade unions. If the relationship is handled constructively and correctly, these two movements could reinforce each other and bring the struggle to a higher level.

International cooperation and coordination of these alliances and movements are important, but in order to coordinate across borders, there have to be strong and active social movements at the local and national level in the first place. There is no such thing as an abstract global struggle against neoliberalism. Social struggles are being globalized as and when local and national movements realize the need for cooperation across borders in order to advance their positions against internationally existent and well coordinated counter forces. Even if a global perspective and international coordination is necessary, the primary task remains to organize the struggle and to build the necessary social alliances locally.

In Norway, over the last few years, the so-called Campaign for the Welfare State<sup>10</sup> has been pretty successful in building opposition. The alliance includes trade unions in both the private and public sectors, women's organizations, student organizations, retired people's association, small peasants' organization, organizations of users of welfare services, etc. It is not yet a real popular movement, but this broad alliance represents the political, social and organizational infrastructure which is necessary if the aim is to stop the policy of liberalization, deregulation and privatization – and make another world possible.

### **Conclusion**

The welfare state is not only a sum of social institutions and public budgets. It was made possible by certain power relations which permeated all parts of society, including: full employment policy; regulated markets and restricted competition; increased influence of employees and trade unions at the workplace; redistribution of wealth and poverty eradication; and universal services as opposed to means testing.

The shift in the balance of power between labour and capital over the last 25 years has influenced all these provisions

(increased unemployment, exclusion, poverty, health problems and so on), and the welfare state is in danger of weathering away its power base.

The following three main pillars constituted the power base of the welfare state: the needs of the capitalist economy expressed through the social welfare state thinking as conceived by social liberal politicians; the struggle of the labour movement (at the particular time expressed through its strength in class compromise); and the existence of a competing Eastern European system, serving to discipline capital owners in the West.

The latter has broken down. The relatively stable class compromise is likewise breaking down. This means that if the working class and allied social forces are going to maintain what they have achieved, and not fall back to minimum, paternalistic and means tested benefits of the social liberal type, they will have to mobilize the social and economic strength which they still represent and are able to raise in today's society – in confrontation with offensive capitalist forces.

Since the welfare state was the result of a very specific historic development, it can hardly be copied. Neither can it easily become an export product. The attempts of many labour organizations of the North to *export* their successful model to their brothers and sisters in developing countries, fail in two important ways. Firstly, they underestimate the threats and attacks which their social model is currently facing back home and which, under continued offensive from the neoliberal forces, lead to the gradual undermining of the welfare state. Secondly, when social dialogue and tri-partite co-operation are promoted as the way forward, de-linked from any assessment of the actual balance of power between labour and capital, it is not only politically wrong, it is counter-productive and will lead the struggle astray.

The most important lessons to be learned from the Nordic model are the hard social struggles and the enormous shift in the balance of power between labour and capital which were required in order to achieve the social progress of the welfare state, but also how fragile the model is, and how unstable and vulnerable the power base of the welfare state has proved to be.

Based on the experiences of the last 25 years, the perspective must now be to go beyond the welfare state – to a socially and democratically organized society where peoples' needs and environmental limits become our guiding principles. The

main aim of the labour movement in the North as well as in the South today must therefore be to delimit the power of capital and to make the economy subject to democratic control. This will not be achieved through social dialogue and tri-partite cooperation, but through class struggle and social confrontations. History tells us that power never steps down. It has to be brought down.

### **Endnotes**

1. National Coordinator of the Campaign for the Welfare State (*for velferdsstaten*) in Norway and a founding member of Attac Norway; formerly a consultant for the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees and staff member at the Norwegian Union of Railwaymen and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) in London; Vice President of the ITF Road Transport Workers' Section. E-mail: [asbjorn.wahl@velferdsstaten.no](mailto:asbjorn.wahl@velferdsstaten.no).
2. The *European Social Model* is often being used to describe the social welfare states that developed in Western Europe particularly after World War II, including the increased influence of labour organizations in these societies. However, while the Western European countries developed many common features, it is also important to keep in mind that the European Social Model in reality was a number of different models which developed within the framework of strong nation-states. They were nationally and not European based, with their own traditions and peculiarities. In Spain and Portugal even fascism survived until the 1970s. On the other hand, these social models had many similarities regarding the historic context, global power relations and cultural relationships. This article does not dwell on national specificities, but instead focuses on a generalized welfare state model.
3. This is particularly important to notice today, since a large segment of the national and international trade union movement is pursuing very narrowly focused campaigns for labour standards, as if these will balance out the adverse effects of market deregulation. The opposite is the case; in order for formal labour standards to be effective, the balance of power must be shifted by limiting the power of capital.
4. There is no direct correlation between high social spending and the quality of the welfare state. For example, the health sector in the USA uses 15 percent of GDP, while the corresponding level of spending in the more advanced Scandinavian welfare states is about 10 percent of GDP.
5. The role of the Soviet Union in this regard should not be interpreted as a quality mark for the Soviet social model. It was first and foremost the threat this model represented regarding the ownership



of the means of production which was decisive for capital owners in the West.

6. This was, of course, only seldom, half way and indirectly expressed by leaders of the labour movement. Socialist rhetoric was regularly used, especially during the first years of class cooperation, although more in the trade unions than in the Labour Party, since socialist sentiments were still strong at the grassroots.
7. The author of this article introduced the notion *brutalization of work* in Norway some years ago to describe the rapidly increasing exclusion of workers from the labour market under neoliberalism. Eleven per cent of the Norwegian labour force are currently excluded from the labour market and have been transferred to disability pension schemes, compared to 6 per cent 25 years ago. The issue is now commonly up for public debate.
8. See [www.ourworldisnotforsale.org](http://www.ourworldisnotforsale.org).
9. The Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees has developed the so-called Model Municipality Project which has proved quite successful in this regard. It is an alternative to privatization and marketization, a bottom-up project based on the knowledge and experiences of the workers involved. Further information can be found here: [http://www.fagforbundet.no/Modules/KB\\_Publish/ShowPage\\_WYSIWYG.asp?PageID=1074](http://www.fagforbundet.no/Modules/KB_Publish/ShowPage_WYSIWYG.asp?PageID=1074)
10. See [www.velferdsstaten.no/english](http://www.velferdsstaten.no/english).

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