

REVIEW ESSAY

Norwegian Labour History

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- Arbeiderbevegelsens historie i Norge [The History of the Labour Movement in Norway]. Ed. by Edvard Bull, Arne Kokkvoll, Jakob Sverdrup and Lill-Ann Jensen, Tiden Norsk Forlag, Oslo 1985–1990. N.kr. 2940.00.
- Vol. 1: BULL, EDVARD. Arbeiderklassen blir til (1850–1900). [1985, 559 pp.]
- Vol. 2: BJØRNSEN, ØYVIND. På klassekampens grunn (1900–1920). [1990, 599 pp.]
- Vol. 3: MAURSETH, PER. Gjennom kriser til makt (1920–1935). [1987, 616 pp.]
- Vol. 4: PRYSER, TORE. Klassen og nasjonen (1935–1946). [1988, 634 pp.]
- Vol. 5: BERGH, TROND. Storhetstid (1945–1965). [1987, 605 pp.]
- Vol. 6: NYHAMAR, JØSTEIN. Nye utfordringer (1965–1990). [1990, 606 pp.]

The Norwegian Labour party (DNA) was founded on 21–22 August 1887 in Arendal. For the centenary of this occasion senior officials of the party and the Norwegian Trade Union Confederation (LO) have, in collaboration with the Tiden publishing house, prepared a novel and excellently presented definitive reference work on the subject of the history of the labour movement in their country. The six volumes cover the history of all the organizations which were part of the movement and highlight the autonomy as well as the idiosyncrasies of its development in Norway.

For internal technical reasons which have nothing to do with the wholly unforeseeable developments in the contemporary labour movement, the second and last volume could not be published until 1990. Edvard Bull, who had compiled the first volume and also wanted to publish the second, died in 1986, while Arne Kokkvoll, who was originally to write volume 6, withdrew after becoming mayor in his home town of Røros. Furthermore, the chronological overlap of volumes 4 and 5 hints at a change of the original concept (inasmuch as one existed in the first place). The year 1948 was originally set as the dividing line between the two volumes. On closer examination it becomes clear, however, that the editors of the individual volumes followed their own outlines and interpreted the guidelines laid down in volume 1 very differently. The result is the following six titles: “The Working Class Emerges” (vol. 1), “At the Heart of the Class Struggle” (vol. 2), “From Crises to Power” (vol. 3), “Class and Nation” (vol. 4), “Heyday” (vol. 5) and “New Challenges” (vol. 6).

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In volume 1 Bull establishes a “main line” comprising the origin of the Norwegian working class “as such” and its development to a class “in its own right”. His account starts with the impact of France’s 1848 revolution on Norway and ends with the founding of the LO and other organizations which form the framework for the development of the labour movement in the twentieth century. The date of the DNA’s founding congress is not considered a watershed: a conference held by delegates from only four cities was not considered “a major event” at a time when workers’ associations already existed in many towns in Norway (p. 368).

According to Bull, the DNA was established in the two decades preceding the turn of the century, or more precisely between 1885 and 1891. It is true that the politically most significant social democratic workers’ associations were founded in 1885 by Christian Holtermann Knudsen in the capital Kristiania (Oslo) and by Sophus Pihl in Bergen, a centre of trade. In 1891 the party adopted its present name and, more significantly, a programme which followed the German Social Democrats’ Erfurt Programme in content and sometimes even phrasing (a point which, incidentally, the author fails to mention).

As a turning point Bull posits the industrial revolution, which reached Norway in the 1850s and 1860s and led to the rise of a “new working class” – as against the old, numerous pre-proletarian cottage workers (*husmenn*) – which did not possess any means of production (p. 239). He covers the complex developments in detail in the volume’s second part, devoting considerable attention to the bourgeois influence on these workers which he compares to missionary activities as practised in the colonies. Internal and external missionary work are for him examples of the “cultural imperialism” of the age.

Part one contains a comprehensive overview of the Thrane movement, which is little known outside Norway. Bull provides an excellent description of its astonishing breadth and regional differentiations. He considers this movement, which sought voting rights for *husmenn*, was led by the school teacher Marcus Thrane, coalesced under the influence of events in France and could only be suppressed violently in 1851, “the first political party in Norway” (p. 228). In his sociological analysis he draws heavily on the theologian Eilert Sundt, who had joined the movement briefly as a student and who after the suppression was the first to try to analyse the social causes of its emergence. As far as the initiator and organizer of the movement is concerned, Bull emphasizes that Thrane, who called himself a socialist, developed his own political positions, which approximated to those of Marx in key respects. It is clear that Bull would like to claim him for a reformist socialism which does not prepare the revolution but only threatens it.

Øyvind Bjørnson, who took Bull’s place after his death, completed volume 2 in 1990 as the last of the series. It deals with the development of the Norwegian labour movement into a socially, culturally and politically unified force. Trenchantly he describes how the movement became

an influential factor in society, developed its own symbols and ideals, established its own press organs and assembly halls, and how its relationship to the bourgeoisie began to dominate social life in Norway. The strong emphasis, however, on the social, cultural and political diversity above all at the local level leads him to neglect some central questions. For instance, the dissolution of the union with Sweden in 1905 is not mentioned once in his account, and the strong anti-militarism and pacifism of the Norwegian labour movement is only dealt with in the next volume.

In part one, on the genesis and original structure of the Norwegian working class, Bjørnson shows how differences in the labour process and working environment led to specific basic attitudes and strategies in the political and the trade union struggle respectively. He is particularly concerned to give due recognition to working women, who were numerically dominant in certain trades around the turn of the century. The fixing of women's roles as housewives and mothers, a concomitant of the industrial revolution, was resisted by the social democratic women's movement mainly on economic grounds.

Bjørnson's general remarks are complemented by a chronological account divided into three parts. The trade union movement and the DNA achieved their political breakthrough between 1900 and 1907. During the "consolidation phase", which lasted until 1916, the labour movement became influential in parliamentary life, especially at the local level. "Radicalizing trends" appeared only subsequently. The "left-wing" opposition to the reformist policies gained ground and was victorious at the party conference of April 1918. It was organized around the union opposition and the youth movement. Under the leadership of Kyrre Grepp, Martin Tranmæl, Emil Stang and Olav Schefflo it embodied various tendencies with very different experiences and strategies. For them the DNA was foremost a party of revolutionary class struggle, as expressed most clearly in its joining the Comintern.

Per Maurseth, who covers the inter-war period (1920–1935) in volume 3, repeatedly refers back to developments between 1917 and 1920. The history of the Norwegian labour movement indeed reached a high point and turning-point in 1920, which can only be explained sufficiently with careful consideration of the events immediately leading up to it. That Maurseth does painstakingly, while his account of the subsequent years becomes increasingly more general. Only the last forty-five pages deal with the prehistory of the next high point and turning point, which he sets from 1930 until the culmination in 1935. This year marked the beginning of "a new era in Norwegian history" (p. 532), with the DNA taking power for the second time and retaining it for virtually the next thirty years. (The party had formed its first government in 1928 but this remained in office for only two weeks.)

Maurseth provides a comprehensive analysis of the political situation in the 1920s, in particular of the first half of the decade. The developments at this time were the breakaways by the reformists in 1921 and later the

revolutionary internationalists, who founded the Communist Party of Norway (NKP) in 1923; the reunion of the DNA and the reformists in 1927 and the merged party's gradual marginalization of the communists. He also covers at length relations with the international labour movement – rather cursorily dealt with in the other volumes. These, however, were of no great importance to the Norwegian labour movement after 1923, when the DNA was excluded from the Comintern. It is in this context that certain inaccuracies occur: on p. 36 the Scandinavian Labour Congress in Stockholm is dated December 1920 rather than 1919; it remains unclear whether Jacob Friis wanted to leave the EKKI in 1921 (p. 175) or to stay in it (p. 178); and Solomon Abramovich Lozovsky (1878–1952), leader of the RILU, is referred to as Arnold Lossovsky on p. 357f and in the index.

Similar small inaccuracies occur in volume 4, in which Tore Pryser deals with the DNA's first five years in government, then very comprehensively with the subsequent five years of German rule, and finally and quite briefly with the immediate post-war period. He states, for instance, that the DNA's membership first exceeded 100,000 in 1934, when this had already been the case once in late 1919 (volume 3, p. 41). Thereafter the (largely collectively affiliated) membership had shrunk dramatically, not least due to the party's split, and it only rose again with the return of the reformists. The DNA recorded its biggest increase in membership when it was the governing party (it had over 170,000 members in 1938), when, as Pryser shows, it took on the character of a social democratic people's party, widened its social basis accordingly, and was able to overcome the emerging fascist forces (and the communists). However, the party did not achieve an absolute majority in the 1936 election, and Johan Nygaardsvold's government had to rely on external support initially from the Farmers' Party and then the Liberal Party (Venstre). This dependency, Pryser argues, forced and facilitated the adoption of reformist policies. "We shall never know what the DNA would have done with an absolute majority, but there is reason to believe that even then the party would have followed a reformist path" (p. 38f), he states.

With the description of the DNA's policies as the governing party the study takes on national-history dimension. Pryser also covers foreign policy, although he does not do justice to the new quality imparted to "Nordic cooperation" by the social democratic governments as instanced, for example, by the joint efforts to remain neutral in the event of war. The long section on "collaboration, conformity and resistance" during the war contains much new material, in particular on the communists' role in the resistance struggle. Pryser confirms that the NKP was "the only party to set up its own sabotage and combat units" (p. 372) and that it was "an important driving force behind the development and direction of the home-based resistance movement" (p. 408). A subsection covers, for the first time, the course and outcome of the "nazification of the labour movement", i.e. the unions, pursued by the Quisling regime and the occupying

power (although the latter tended to remain in the background). Pryser does not draw on the surviving documents of the relevant Labour and Social Security Department of the German "Reich Commissar for the Occupied Norwegian Territories" in the National Archive in Oslo. Of the heads of this department he mentions only Rudolf Kasper (p. 309), once and without giving his first name or listing him in the index.

In contrast to the first four volumes, the last two volumes are largely devoid of social-historical investigations. In volume 5 Trond Bergh's interest lies rather with the central figures in the labour movement: primarily Einar Gerhardsen, the "exponent of renewal" (p. 12), and the representatives of the "new generation" in the party leadership, Trygve Bratteli and Haakon Lie. He devotes over 300 pages to the period from 1945–1953, the "great ascendancy" of the labour movement, when it could claim to be a "majority movement" (p. 13). In the general election of October 1945 the DNA gained its first absolute majority with 76 Storting seats (compared to the NKP's 11), which it was to hold for sixteen years. With the exception of a short-lived bourgeois coalition in 1963, the party stayed in power until 1965. Bergh explains the DNA's growing influence primarily in terms of its organizational superiority over all its rivals, the extraordinary growth of the industrial labour force, the high numbers of young voters (after the reduction of the voting age to 21 in 1946 the DNA became the party of the young), and the failure of the bourgeois parties to provide alternative policies.

How the DNA managed its position of power is shown with the help of significant examples: discussions on the planned economy, concepts of industrialization, social reforms, creation of the welfare state, and, not least, security and defence policy. The Anglo-American war economy, with its high efficiency and full employment, had created a favourable impression and stimulated interest within the DNA in a centrally managed economy as practised through the Marshall Plan. However, no programme of "socialization" was carried out on the grounds that the party had no political mandate for it. The debate on security policy was initially confined to high-level bodies like the parliamentary group and the cabinet. Opinions were divided on whether to join a Nordic or a transatlantic defence alliance. While the still influential Tranmæl and Lie advocated membership of what became the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) at a very early stage, the party leadership remained divided until Gerhardsen declared his support for NATO, which swung the overwhelming majority of the party behind the transatlantic option.

In part two, entitled "Unity and Division" and covering 1953–1961, Bergh shows how the argument over "nuclear policy" led to a split within the DNA and the formation of the Socialist People's Party (SF). The "German question" also became controversial within the party. On this issue the government in the early 1950s was "more sympathetic to the views of the Christian Democrat Adenauer than those of the Social Democrats Schumacher and Ollenhauer" (p. 288). In 1959 the "German

question” led to major disagreements on no less than three occasions: over the stationing of German contact officers at NATO’s Command North, German access to NATO depots in Norway, and a visit to East Germany by a delegation of the students’ movement. The debates generated by these developments were instrumental in the formation and strengthening of the circle around the magazine *Orienteering*, a direct antecedent of the SF.

In part three, entitled “The Labour Party in a Minority” and covering 1961–1965, Bergh points to the stagnation which followed the political crises. He ends with an evaluation of the “Gerhardsen era”, which could also have served as an evaluation of the “Nygaardsvold era” within the wider scope of the work.

The journalist Jøstein Nyhamar has written volume 6 as a report on the political development of the labour movement from the mid-1960s onwards. An interesting overview of the social changes in Norway after 1965 forms the introduction and demonstrates that the long period of stability covered in volume 5 definitely belonged to the past. In the 1970s the production and processing of oil and natural gas emerged as a new and major branch of Norway’s export industry. This had repercussions in politics and the economy, and led not least to a shift in voting patterns. While the DNA still gained 43.1 per cent of the vote in 1965, its share had fallen to 34.3 per cent in 1989. Its rival on the left, the Socialist Left Party (SV), the successor of the SF formed by its merger with the Democratic Socialists and sections of the NKP, gained 10.1 per cent in 1989. (The NKP has not been represented in parliament since 1961.)

In part one, entitled “In Opposition” and covering 1965–1971, Nyhamar describes a wholly new situation for the DNA after its decades in power, and also considers the generational change in the party leadership. In 1965 Gerhardsen relinquished the leadership to Bratteli, who had been his deputy for many years; Reulf Steen became deputy leader and in turn succeeded Bratteli in 1975.

Membership of the European Community (EC) became the key domestic policy issue for the Bratteli government, formed after the dramatic collapse of the bourgeois coalition in 1971. Part two, entitled “The Turbulent Years” and covering 1971–1980, focuses on the background and development of the EC debate; it takes up more than half of Nyhamar’s account. The government resigned after the voters’ rejection of EC membership in a referendum. After the 1973 election Bratteli could only form a minority government and had to rely on the external support of the Socialist Electoral Alliance, the SV’s predecessor. Among the cabinet’s three women members was Gro Harlem Brundtland, who in 1981 took over the party leadership from Odvar Nordli in 1981 and became Norway’s first female prime minister, albeit initially only for a few months until the election later that year.

Part three, entitled “The Difficult 1980s”, is followed by a conclusion which was originally to have been drafted by Steen and now has a less

“official” character. Nyhamar urges the Norwegian labour movement to take on the new challenges. In his view the movement’s crisis is primarily of an ideological nature but also has organizational causes. The revival of the old vision which had informed its reform work is “perhaps the labour movement’s foremost task in the 1990s” (p. 570). Its great history, on which it can look back with pride, could help it in the necessary redefinition of its identity.