

## PRAGMATIC COMMUNISTS

### Industrial Conflict and Finnish Building Workers' Unions 1949-1973

Tapio Bergholm<sup>1</sup>

Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions- SAK

#### Introduction

In Finland Communist have substantial electoral support and quite strong position in trade union movement. Although the Finland there has been quite high propensity strike we have challenged earlier the link between Communism and strikes.<sup>1</sup> We are in good international company because e.g. Richard Hyman have much earlier made the point that party political motives for strikes have been exaggerated.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand there are still stereotypical interpretations about crucial communist involvement and influence organising strikes or some other ways making strikes happen.<sup>3</sup>

In Finland there is some kind of tradition among Finnish Security Intelligence Service and its predecessors to believe, that Communist were always planning strikes. Security Police reported quite often from 1920s onwards that Communist had plans to organise gradually growing strike movement, which according to some reports, should grow to revolutionary general strike or to general strike to enhance Communist smaller political ambitions.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper we look strikes not from statistical or societal angle but from the perspective of communists themselves. How did the leaders of Building Workers' Union – the strongest Communist led Union – prepare, look and organise strikes in 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The picture is complicated and complex. In the nutshell it is obvious that building industry was prone to industrial conflicts, but on the other hand the Communist leadership of Building Workers' Union was often cautious and even reluctant to be the vanguard of strike action or battering ram to achieve wage demands made by Finnish Communist Party (Suomen Kommunistinen Puolue, SKP).

This paper is based on my research of Finnish industrial relations after. There is quite good access to Communist sources in Finland. The description and analysis is hear based mainly on the sources of political committee and trade union section of SKP.

---

<sup>1</sup> [tapio.bergholm@sak.fi](mailto:tapio.bergholm@sak.fi)

Marín Corbera, Martí; Domènech Sampere, Xavier; Martínez i Muntada, Ricard (eds.): *III International Conference Strikes and Social Conflicts: Combined historical approaches to conflict. Proceedings*, Barcelona, CEFID-UAB, 2016, pp. 568-577. ISBN 978-84-608-7860-5.

### **Bitter experience**

As Cold War gradually heated in 1947-1949 Finnish Communists became marginalised in parliamentary politics and in the Confederation of Finnish Trade Unions (Suomen Ammattiyhdistysten Keskusliitto, SAK [from 1969 The Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions, Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö, SAK]). Communist decided to challenge Social Democratic minority government and Social Democratic leadership of SAK. SKP organised strike wave in autumn 1949. Many unions dodged to pressure from the party and participated, but some avoided this industrial conflict by organising membership vote. The Building Workers' Union took part to this unsuccessful strike which ended in defeat and first expulsion from SAK and then re-entry into SAK with humiliating terms. This was a bitter experience of Strum und Darang for Communist leaders of the union.<sup>5</sup>

Building Workers' Union was on guard after this. It feared disintegration organised by Industrial Unions with Social Democratic leadership in early 1950s.<sup>6</sup> In collective bargaining union was cautious and did not always even followed the wage demands set in central committee of SKP.<sup>7</sup> Even in the trade union section of SKP was aware that building workers should fight alone for their demands.<sup>8</sup> Negotiation approach of the union was in the spring 1954 first pragmatic not combative as it postponed termination of collective agreement, because employers preferred to negotiate new collective agreement without termination.<sup>9</sup> Negotiations were long and difficult, because union pushed shorter working day for longer period than before. After local strikes and one day national strike collective agreement was accepted by both parties. This meant 45 hours week for 1 ½ months longer period for each year. Social Democratic leaders of SAK set strict limits to wage demands of this affiliated union. Therefore results of collective bargaining in building industry were far from satisfactory from the perspective of SKP.<sup>10</sup>

Political committee of SKP discussed targets of next collective agreements for Building Workers' Union in April 1955. Chairperson Aarne Saarinen told that SAK restricted also this time negotiation frame of the union. Building Workers' Union gave strike warning together with Bricklayers' Union. Strike preparations and involvement of SAK gave limited success again. Communist in these unions were not willing to risk expulsion from SAK and made collective agreement without industrial action.<sup>11</sup>

### **Reluctant Vanguard of the Working Class**

General strike in 1956 was long dreamed fulfilment of the dreams of working class unity for Communists, even though the Social Democrats of SAK kept national leadership in their firm grip all the time.<sup>12</sup> After successful strike price inflation was rapid and wage gains were lost in few months. Communist demanded determined action from SAK to get wage rises fully to compensate price rises. At the same time communist trade union leaders saw no possibilities before next year. The political committee of SKP was cautious in November 1956 and decided that, if there was not united front in strike action Building Workers' Union, Bricklayers Union', Food Workers' Union and some other union did not have capacities for isolated industrial action.<sup>13</sup>

Some Communist trade union leaders argued in favour of general strike, but majority thought that was unrealistic way to solve grid log of wage negotiations. In March 1957 chairman of Building Workers' Union Aarne Saarinen made it crystal clear that alone communist i.e. building workers should not be thrown first into struggle. Chairman of Bricklayers' Union Urho Kilpinen repeated the same point. He said that they (i.e. Communists) should not take building branch first to struggle because there the business cycle was bad. In the time of high unemployment Communist led Building Workers' Union and Bricklayers Union tried to avoid open conflict.

To please party, dissatisfied members and to put pressure on employers these unions organised one day demonstration strike on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> May 1958. Employers answered with two day lockout (Monday and Tuesday) following the strike of Building Workers' Union and Bricklayers Union. After the strike and lockout trade union section of SKP decided in contradictory way that unions should not organise strikes alone anymore and at the same Communist should speak against compromise in collective bargaining round. This tactic did not work very well. Collective agreements in building trades followed the line agreed in Metal industry.<sup>14</sup>

This created opposition and criticism. Due to new wage fixing earnings of concrete reinforcement workers come down about 20 percent. This group criticised heavily union leaders and was rancorous until 1970s. Executive committee of trade union section of SKP evaluated in November 1957 that the authority of trade union movement among workers had declined. This was the case also in Building Workers' Union.<sup>15</sup>

The executive of trade union section of SKP in March 1958 accepted quite ambitious trade union demands for employers in building industry. Also, action plan of the two

unions was accepted by this organ in May 1958. Building workers voted twice with substantial majority in favour of industrial action. First ballot was open also for workers outside unions and the second was members only vote. Strong mandate from the workers to strike did not end the industrial peace in building trades. Actually Aarne Saarinen told political committee of SKP that there was not great enthusiasm among workers to go on strike. He also made clear that with meagre union strike funds great struggles were impossible. In long drawn negotiations new collective agreement was achieved in beginning of August. Results were far from brave demands put forward in the first place.<sup>16</sup>

### **Limited strikes instead of political education with strike experience**

Executive of trade union section of SKP agreed that union dominated by Communist should not hurry negotiations with their counterpart employers' organisations. This was the way to avoid danger that these unions were solving difficult situation by struggle alone. November 1958 Aarne Saarinen reported to political committee of SKP in April 1959, that negotiations were difficult in building industry. Building Workers' Union and Bricklayers' Union planned united, limited and targeted strike action. Urho Kilpeläinen commented that employers could enlarge planned industrial conflict by declaring lockout. Aim of the unions was to restore traditional wage gap compared to the wages in metal industry.<sup>17</sup>

After general ballot of organised and unorganised workers in building sites strike started in three big cities and areas surrounding them. Employers had political motivation not to avoid strike. They could not give Communists more than other workers. Strike was well planned and economically not too heavy, when majority of the membership could work and pay extra strike fees to unions involved in strike action. One quarter of the strike costs of Building Workers' Union were funded by Communist dominated trade union international World Federation of Trade Unions. Compromise was reached after little over months' conflict. Employers were unable to use lockout weapon and workers achieved substantial gains in new collective agreement. Chairman Aarne Saarinen praised limited and targeted strike action as effective weapon to achieve goals without too heavy costs for unions and burdens for workers.<sup>18</sup>

This partial strike strategy was successfully employed in 1963 again. This time only metropolitan area of Helsinki and remote power station building site in Seitakorva, Lapland were in strike. Strike was this time in the winter and it lasted longer. Gains

achieved with this strike were big, even though the gap to metal workers' wages did not diminish.<sup>19</sup>

\*

\*

\*

From political perspective it is interesting, how little actions of Finnish Communist Party SKP and strongest trade unions with Communist leadership match with stereotype ideas and general perceptions about Communists and strikes. Building Workers' Union and Bricklayers' Union were very pragmatic in their industrial action. Strikes in 1959 and 1963 were limited and targeted and effective and cheap. Their aim was to limit not to enlarge these strikes. Strike results were more important than educational strike experience. It is therefore obvious that raising class consciousness with as many as possible participants was not the aim of the unions or SKP in these building strikes.

### **Building Workers' Union, the Hard-core Minority of SKP and Class Struggle**

Building Workers' Union and Metal Workers' Union had several demarcation disputes about organisational boundaries and about rights to make collective agreements. Building Workers' Union pressed demand for its own collective agreement in elevator instalment works, even though collective agreement of elevator technicians in building sites belonged traditionally and according the decisions of SAK to Metal Workers' Union. Strike ensued. It was long and bitter and unsuccessful. It started in May and lasted until October 1964. Danger of rotten and totally lost struggle was imminent but political committee of SKP decided against support strike of other building workers. Damage control was on agenda not enlargement of conflict for purpose of political education of workers. After lost battle strikers were – with good reasons bitter.<sup>20</sup>

Trade union officers and leaders of Building Workers' Union were central figures in the unification process of Finnish trade union movement in years 1965-1969. They also took part in the overthrow of dogmatic conservative leadership of SKP and supported reformers of the party. Chairman of Building Workers' Union Aarne Saarinen was elected as chairman of SKP in January 1966. Conservatives (Stalinists) formed minority faction. Gradually party split was institutionalised, when minority became more organised and sectarian and confident. Communist Party of Soviet Union made it clear to both majority and minority factions that new breakaway party or expulsion of dissidents were not options to solve problems of SKP.<sup>21</sup>

Minority faction was quite aggressive in Building Workers' Union. Three year collective agreement made in 1966, participation in the making of incomes policy agreements in 1968 and 1969 were original sins from perspective of dogmatic minority faction. Members of this faction attacked union leadership with same vocabulary of accusations which were earlier directed to Social Democratic leaders of SAK. Charges of betrayal, of selling members short in collective bargaining, of class collaboration etc. were thrown against union leaders. Fierce disloyal Communists was a surprise for Building Workers' Union Communist majority. Officers of SKP blamed already in May 1966 minority for abandonment of democratic centralism. This accusation of apostasy showed how severe conflict was in trade union movement.<sup>22</sup>

In Finnish historiography there is strong current of interpretations that Ambassador of Soviet Union Aleksei Beljakov planned and agitated revolutionary strike action in autumn 1970 and winter 1970-1971. Major industrial conflicts in metal industry and building industry were in this framework caused by Soviet involvement in Finnish industrial relations. Another interpretation of metal workers' strike is political power struggle between Social Democrats and Communists in trade union movement. Here interpretation is less dramatic, but hopefully more accurate and realistic.<sup>23</sup>

Communist had proposed targeted and partial strike action, when Metal Workers' Union decided it strike strategy, but Social Democrats pushed through decision of all-out strike. Building Workers' Union avoided such costly and inefficient strike strategy because in this union Communist had majority in all official organs. Not even this time was the idea of revolutionary general strike on agenda in Building Workers' Union. Political committee of SKP decided already in December 1970 in favour of limited partial strike. Strike started 10<sup>th</sup> of March and employers' partial lockout 16<sup>th</sup> of March. Agreement was reached in 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1971. Both sides claimed victory after conflict, but it looked more or less a tie.<sup>24</sup>

Bricklayers' Union merged with Building Workers' Union in 1971-1972. This merger was a part of larger unification and restructuring process of Finnish trade union movement in 1969-1978. Without severe political pressure and tough guidance from central organisation SAK this unification of two trade union had not happened. Craft pride of skilled bricklayers was main problem in this partially and temporarily painful process. Also the minority faction of SKP opposed this merger.<sup>25</sup>

After heavy conflict in 1971 strike funds of Building Workers' Union were empty. Still it rejected centralised agreement between SAK and employer central organisations.

With short local warning strikes union gave push to negotiations without any cost to union funds. Building Workers' Union had planned to put plumbers as battering ram against employers. According the plan other braches could get same terms in their collective agreements as plumbers. This plan did not work very well. Employers retorted to more aggressive and larger lockout threat. The threat worked and union have to avoid greater conflict. Vanguard of plumbers got so little in their collective agreement that they were truly dissatisfied.<sup>26</sup>

Labour Court ruled in favour of Building Workers' Union in April 1973. Employers tried to introduce changes into collective agreement and this way to overrule interpretation of collective agreement made by the court. This made negotiations difficult. Building Workers' Union used punctual and partial and short strikes to make employers more compromise-prone. Short walkouts of painters, bricklayers, carpenters etc. – often only one group each time – created havoc and chaos in building sites. Employer organisations in building industry formed united lockout-front against this strike strategy.

Lockout started in 23th May and ended 17<sup>th</sup> June 1973. This time employers were in offensive and union in defence. In the end of the day employers dropped their demand to substantially change collective agreement. Compromise in this conflict felt like victory for union leadership but hostile and belligerent criticism of minority faction made this victory bitter indeed. Communist caucus of Building Workers' Union and organs of Communist Party had lots of dirty laundry to wash after this conflict in building industry. Members of majority faction of SKP felt in Building Workers' Union that both Social Democrats and members of minority faction of SKP sabotaged negotiations and struggle with their disloyal behaviour.<sup>27</sup>

\* \* \*

In early 1970s industrial conflict with all measurements reached new peaks in Finland. This was not only due to Communist revolutionary zeal or stubbornness or idea of revolutionary education by strike participation. Collective bargaining targets and strike strategy of Finnish Building Workers' Union show how pragmatic and parsimonious Communist could be, when they have power and responsibility of a trade union. It is also obvious, that resistance and stubbornness and resources for united action of Finnish employers was better, when their adversary or negotiation partner was a Communist

dominated trade union. In this perspective there were good reasons for Building Workers' Union to be cautious and alert and to avoid all strike romanticism.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tapio Bergholm: Ammattiliiton nousu ja tuho. Kuljetusalan ammattiyhdistystoiminta ja työmarkkinasuhteiden murros 1944-1949, (Bibliotheca Historica 19 Suomen Historiallinen Seura ja Työpoliittinen tutkimus 166 Työministeriö), Helsinki 1997; Tapio Bergholm and Paul Jonker-Hoffrén: Farewell to the communist strike hypothesis? – The diversity of striking in Finland between 1971-1990, teoksessa Strikes and Social Conflicts. Towards a global history (eds. António Simões do Paço, Raquel Varela, Sjaak van der Velden), International Association Strikes and Social Conflict, online book, Lisbon 2012. [http://iassc-mshdijon.in2p3.fr/IMG/pdf/strikes\\_and\\_social\\_conflicts\\_online\\_book.pdf](http://iassc-mshdijon.in2p3.fr/IMG/pdf/strikes_and_social_conflicts_online_book.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hyman: Strikes, Fontana/Collins, London 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Jesper Hamark: Ports, dock workers and labour market conflicts, Gothenburg Studies in Economic History 12, University of Gothenburg, Göteborg 2014, 143-152, 155-157.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Lakkoliikkeiden painopiste valtiojohtoisissa laitoksissa 19.3.1973, Suojelupoliisin arkisto.

<sup>5</sup> Bergholm 1997,236-240, 313-375; Tapio Bergholm: Sopimussyhteiskunnan synty I. Työehtosopimusten läpimurrosta yleislakkoon. SAK 1944-1956, Otava, Keuruu 2005, 186-255.

<sup>6</sup> KK:n ammatillinen osasto 4.2.1952, SKP ay-jaosto Ca 2, Kansan Arkisto (KA).

<sup>7</sup> KK:n ammatillinen osasto työvaliokunta (tvk) 25.4.1953, SKP ay-jaosto Cb6, KA.

<sup>8</sup> KK:n ammatillinen osasto tvk 15.1.1954, SKP ay-jaosto Cb6, KA.

<sup>9</sup> KK:n ammatillinen osasto tvk 25.2.1954, SKP ay-jaosto Cb6, KA.

<sup>10</sup> KK:n ammatillinen osasto tvk 3.6., 12.6., 29.6., 30.6., 6.7., 10.7.1954, SKP ay-jaosto Cb6, KA; Jyrki Helin: Rakentajien liitto. Rakennusalan työläisten järjestötoiminta Suomessa 1880-luvulta vuoteen 1995, Rakennusliitto ry, Jyväskylä 1998, 194.

<sup>11</sup> SKP poliittinen toimikunta 6.4.1955, Liite 20/LJ/EA-AM/4.4.1955 P.M.

Rakennusalan työehtosopimuskamppailu, KA; Helin 1998, 194.

<sup>12</sup> Bergholm 2005, 473-491.

<sup>13</sup> KK:n ammatillinen jaosto 24.11., 29.11.1956, SKP ay-jaosto Ca 2, KA; SKP KK:n ammatillinen osasto tvk 27.11., 28.11.1956, SKP ay-jaosto Cb6, KA; SKP poliittinen toimikunta 29.11.1956, KA



- 
- <sup>14</sup> KK:n ammatillinen osasto tvk 2.3., 2.5., 24.7.1957, SKP ay-jaosto Cb6, KA; KK:n ammatillinen jaosto 14.5.1957, SKP ay-jaosto Ca 2, KA; SKP poliittinen toimikunta 2.8.1957, KA; Helin 1998, 241-242.
- <sup>15</sup> KK:n ammatillinen osasto tvk 13.11.1957, SKP ay-jaosto Cb6, KA; SKP poliittinen toimikunta 2.8.1957, 12.4.1958, KA; Helin 1998, 242.
- <sup>16</sup> KK:n ammatillinen osasto tvk 8.3., 5.5., 9.6.1958, SKP ay-jaosto Cb6, KA; SKP poliittinen toimikunta 6.7.1958, KA; Helin 1998, 242.
- <sup>17</sup> KK:n ammatillinen osasto tvk 5.11.1958, 4.4., 23.6.1959, SKP ay-jaosto Cb6, KA; SKP poliittinen toimikunta 10.4.1959, liite Rakennustyöläisten työehtosopimuskysymys 7.4.1959, KA.
- <sup>18</sup> KK:n ammatillinen osasto tvk 23.6., 30.6.1959, SKP ay-jaosto Cb6, KA; SKP poliittinen toimikunta 21.5., 27.5., 2.6., 11.6., 22.6., 9.7.1959; Helin 1998, 242-246; Aarne Mattila: Työriitojen sovittelun historia, Työpoliittinen tutkimus 27, Työministeriö, Helsinki 1992, 317.
- <sup>19</sup> Mattila 1992, 317-318; Helin 1998, 267-270.
- <sup>20</sup> SAK työvaliokunta (tvk) 20.4., 14.5., 25.8.1964, Työväen Arkisto (TA); KK ay-jaoston tvk 18.8., 31.8., 7.9., 10.9.1964, SKP ay-jaosto Cb7, KA; Helin 1998, 271-272; Tapio Bergholm: Sopimussyhteiskunnan synty II. Hajaannuksesta tulopoliitiikkaan. Suomen Ammattiyhdistysten Keskusliitto 1956-1969, Otava, Keuruu 2007, 248-249.
- <sup>21</sup> Jukka Paastela: The Finnish Communist Party in the Finnish Political System 1963-1982, University of Tampere Department of Political Science and International Relations Research Reports 111/1991, Tampere 1991, 79-90; Veli-Pekka Leppänen: Kivääri vai äänestyslippu? Suomen kommunistisen puolueen hajaannus 1964-1970, Edita, Helsinki 1999; Bergholm 2007, 249-367.
- <sup>22</sup> KK ay-jaoston tvk, SKP ay-jaosto Cb7, KA; Helin 1998, 303-308; Bergholm 2007, 413-423.
- <sup>23</sup> Juhani Suomi: Taistelu puolueettomuudesta. Urho Kekkonen 1968-1972, Otava, Keuruu 1996, 409-523; Eino Ketola: Suomen Metallityöväen Liitto 1960-1983, Otava, Keuruu 2007, 236-328; Jenni Korkeaaja: Punainen metalli. Kommunistit ja kansandemokraatit Suomen Metallityöväen Liitossa 1899-1983, Metallin vasemmisto, Keuruu 2009, 176-200.

---

<sup>24</sup> SKP poliittinen toimikunta 30.12.1970, 20.1.1971, KA; Tapio Bergholm: Kohti tasa-arvoa. Tulopolitiikan aika I, Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö 1969-1977, Otava, Keuruu 2012, 231-233.

<sup>25</sup> Bergholm 2012, 61-64.

<sup>26</sup> SKP poliittinen toimikunta 28.4., 3.5., 9.5., 17.5.1972, KA; Helin 1998, 347-348; Bergholm 2012, 260-263.

<sup>27</sup> SKP poliittinen toimikunta 23.5., 30.5., 13.6., 17.10., 31.10.1973, Liite 1/20.10.73 Helsingin ja Uudenmaan Rakennusalan kommunistit Kommunistinen Puolue ry Poliittiselle toimikunnalle 2.11.1973, KA; Rakennusalan puoluekomitea SKP:n poliittiselle toimikunnalle 19.12.1973, Rakennusliitto, SKP:n Ay-jaosto, He43, KA; Rakennusalan työehtosopimuskamppailu v. 1973 10.8.-73, Rakennusliitto, SKP:n Ay-jaosto, He44, KA; Helin 1998, 348-349; Bergholm 2012, 309-311.