

Experiences from the Norwegian ML Movement: An Interview with Pål Steigan

Pål Steigan was in the leadership of the Norwegian Marxist-Leninist movement. Now he has written an autobiography, with an emphasis on the M-L movement's best years.

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Steigan's account of his upbringing in post-war Norway is interesting to those who have not lived through it, and probably nostalgic for those readers who remembers the 50s and 60s. Steigan writes well about this, and the book clearly shows how enormously Norway has changed over the past 60 years. He writes about at least three time periods: the social democratic post-war era, the tumultuous 60s and 70s, and the yuppie 80s.

This is not a book review, nor a complete summary of Steigan's book. Rather it is an attempt to draw out some educational key points for those attempting to build a communist party.

Pål Steigan yesterday and today

Pål Steigan was the leader for the Worker's Community Party (Marxist-Leninist) from 1975 to 1984. Before that, he was a leading member of its predecessor, SUFand SUF (M-L).

Today, Pål Steigan is connected to the party Rødt (Red). Rødt is a remnant of AKP(M-L), but has drifted far from its roots. Steigan is nonetheless no enthusiast for the party—he devotes most of his time to independent projects, for instance his blog, where he writes about the contradictions of capitalism, ecology and more. In the book, he writes that the AKP movement has not been particularly relevant since around year 1990.

Pål Steigan is also not exactly excited about Rødt, but has not endorsed any other group either. He has been quite negative in his comments about Tjen Folket—he claims that the organization disgraces communism. His alternative is "Communism 5.0"—a communism he describes in his earlier book, Sammenbruddet [The Collapse]. The new communism is "open source," says Steigan, and separates itself from the old forms of communism because nobody has a monopoly on what is the right or wrong communism.

Regardless of where Steigan stands today, his insights to the Norwegian ML movement has been important. Despite some failures and gaps, it was an extremely successful communist movement from 1970 to 1980. It was one of the largest in the world. In sheer numbers alone, there were quite few—if any—ML parties in Europe that had nearly as many activists, members and friends as the Norwegian AKP (M-L). He (and all the thousands of grassroots activists) deserve respect for this, both from those of us who maintain that the ML movement was very valuable and those who despise it.

Learn from the ML movement

The most interesting thing in the book for the modern day communist is probably Steigan's analysis of their methods—both the good and the bad. Regardless of whether or not one agrees or disagrees with his analysis, they can learn from them. Unfortunately, it appears that he puts more weight on their failures than their recipes for success. Perhaps it is only human to be self-critical, or maybe we can also find this error within the reader.

It is not like Steigan besmirches the movement—there is a lot of joy and pride to find there—but in places like his book, *På den himmelske fredens plass* [In the square of heavenly peace, the Norwegian name for the Chinese Tiananmen square], the tone is occasionally sharply defensive and self-critical.

The Norwegian ML movement was completely dominant in Norway's answer to the international communist movement in the 1960s. In 1966, Steigan was enlisted in Sosialistisk Ungdomsforbund [The Socialist Youth Organization] (SUF)—or a “enrolled Maoist Communist” as he himself describes it—by the older Tron Øgrim. As an ambitious teenager, his plan was clear: he was going to use the reformist organization as a springboard to create the true communist movement in Norway. It was inspired by Mao, his struggle against Soviet revisionism and eventually the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—but also by the communist oppositional struggle during WWII nazi occupation and Norwegian workers' history.

In the start, Øgrim and Steigan's political environment was first and foremost the local Bryn/Hellerud SUF on the eastern edge of Oslo. However, they had relations with several other environments: radical members of the Norwegian Communist Party (NKP), a Marxist bookstore run by a left-oriented member of the same party, Swedish Marxist-Leninists, radical students and other radical SUF chapters. All these environments were more or less characterized by the leftist wind that blew

over the west—the world, in fact—during that time. The Black Panthers' struggle against American racism and apartheid, the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution, the 1968 uprising in France—these were the global movements that rocked Norway as so many other nations.

After political struggle, studies, and practical work, SUF became a Marxist-Leninist organization. They broke with the moderated SF (Socialist People's party) in 1969 and in 1973, and they established the Arbeidernes Kommunistparti (ML) [Workers' Communist Party]. During the 70s, many thousands of people joined the movement. At its highest stage, the party and their youth organizations, Red Youth and the Norwegian Communist Student Union (NKS)) had a few thousand members. Marxism-Leninism led the anti-Vietnam War movement, were critical in the struggle against the EU, organized workers' strikes, dominated university politics, and were eventually a powerful oppositional force in the labor movement.

Steigan points to three virtues that were crucial for the success of the ML movement.

1. Hard Work

Steigan describes how a relatively small political youth environment used huge amounts of time in the work of building up the organization from a small youth environment to a large national apparatus, all in just a few years. They used all their savings and wages from summer jobs to finance their political activities. They worked, sometimes day and night, to build their own publishing company, print flyers and organize meetings, actions and demonstrations. They studied, discussed and were passionately dedicated to their work.

He describes a lively environment with large projects that never stood still. And yet, without a doubt, these activists found much joy in what they were doing. Not least, it's obvious that this true work gave true results. The ML movement found work both for young bookworms and writers, as well as practical and technical people that could devote themselves to keep the presses running. This can be seen clearly in the accounts of the SUF publishing house - how quickly they went from ideas to action and became a local chapter with their own printing press. The movement also had projects ready for artists, organizers, economists, athletes and so on.

It is wonderful to read Steigan's writing about the SUF press. It was a breakneck affair that was expensive and demanded facilities for the equipment. Nonetheless, they counted on its success and kept on driving forward. That the Marxist-Leninists in SUF had their own press was of course an advantage in the internal

struggle. It is also tempting to think that they must have been made of gold to be able to develop such an active and diverse setting. At the time, running a printing press was no simple endeavor. It demanded a lot of work and practical sense. This is why the movement had ample room for all types of members, not just those that liked to write and talk.

There existed, according to Steigan, and this is completely true, hardly any organization in Norway with people who were more willing to work than AKP(m-l).

2. A collected and organized leading core

Steigan says that the ML movement's young leaders were conscious of how damaging splinter groups were for the ideology of movements in other countries. They saw the ML movement in Germany, France and other countries fragment themselves into new parties and groups in conflict with each other. Steigan says that they were always aware of this and entered a pact to keep the leading core indivisible, despite a number of conflicts throughout the years. He calls this a fellowship that agreed to always stand together, regardless of what might happen.

He claims that this core also could have a negative side—that the leadership could appear monolithic to the members and that this was not at all always positive.

Steigan also describes how they also consciously fought against competition and potential splintering. But the most important thing was the unit in the leading core. This unit held itself together from 1965 to 1980. There were of course replacements during this time, but a few key people were there during the whole time – these were Øgrim and Steigan, as well as Sigurd Allern and Sverre Knutsen. The leadership never split—even through the resolution with right deviation in 1976—before the party crisis hit in 1980.

3. The Mass Line

Steigan also writes about the mass line, formulated by Mao Zedong. He writes about how important some of Mao's writings were for him and many others in the movement. Mao's most popular texts was read over and over again. The mantra about serving the people and that the masses were the true heroes challenged Steigan's individualist tendencies. Already as young Marxist-Leninists, they wanted to be important for the people and to make a difference. They wanted to be amongst the people, hold discourse with them and participate where the people were having a movement.

Although they were just a small organization, they were not afraid to take initiative. When the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, Sosialistisk Folkeparti [The Socialist People's Party] held demonstrations that suggested similarities between Socialism and Nazism. SUF(M-L) instead took the initiative to demonstrate against the Soviet invasion with a message that said "no to revisionism, yes to socialism". They also worked against the industrialists, for the class struggle and workers' strikes. The new spring for socialism was also a new spring for striking and an active worker's movement. Marxism-Leninism participated here from the very earliest point to the best of its ability.

Steigan devotes space to point out the errors of the movement.

1. Too much focus on history and foreign struggles?

Steigan writes that the movement used a lot of time splitting hairs in the history of Portugal, Spain, Germany, Albania and Indonesia. He claims that this could be both interesting and relevant, but not for a political party. According to Steigan, they placed themselves in an impossible situation when they set out to have a position on everything.

2. Bet on a base that disappeared?

Steigan writes about how the ML movement depended on building organizational bases within industry. The movement's analysis was classically Marxist in that the industry workers are seen as the core of the proletariat. They encouraged their activists to search there to establish the worker's party within this setting. They planned to build their base within large factories. Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Stavanger had large shipbuilding factories and other industrial zones in central locations in the 1970s. They no longer exist today. Additionally, a large portion of workers today are migrants.

The ML movement went far when they vied for positions in the industrial work places, but the crisis in the party was nearly parallel with the radicalization of the Norwegian industrial workers.

3. Blinders and lighthouses

Despite the fact that the ML movement was influenced and inspired by China, Albania was much closer. They sent some delegations to China, but thousands of people flocked to Albania, "the lighthouse of socialism in Europe". Steigen claims that the party leadership was implicated in a lot of the impacts there, and that they had blinders over Albania for quite some time. They did not want to see Albania's errors and

eventually had disagreements among themselves. Steigan maintains that the “resolution with right deviation” was influenced by the Albanian leadership’s stiff-armed and dogmatic interpretation of Marxism.

4. Resolution with right deviation

Steigan is extremely critical of the party’s 1975 correction campaign, “resolution with right deviation.” He portrays how Tron Øgrim—after conversations with Albanian communists—caught Steigan and the party leadership off guard with a long and comprehensive paper called “Theses on right deviation”. Despite the fact that Steigan and the rest of the party leadership felt that it was a slap in the face, the document was accepted unanimously by the central committee.

Steigan says that this resolution was an “earthquake” and that it stood in opposition against the history of concessions and compromises with social democrats and revisionists. The thesis was 200,000 characters long. In typical “Øgrim” fashion, says Steigan, it was poorly supported by facts or analysis. Steigan claims that the treatment of right deviation the same kinds of elements of guilt that can be seen in Protestantism and that right deviation was whitewashed (“right deviation had done this” and “I would not have been able to do that were it not for right deviation”). To put it concretely, the campaign was a call for collaboration and alliance with SV [Socialist Left] and NKP (Norwegian Communist Party). Steigan writes that this settlement was the closest they ever came to a cultural revolution within the movement, and that the period from 1976-78 was plagued by sectarianism, ultra radicalism and dogmatism. He concludes it was damaging to any flexible tactics because it divided them from revolutionaries in other parties and environments. He says they cut off a fire gate between them and NKP and SV. Steigan points out that when one isolates oneself from damaging influence from revisionists and opportunists, one also often end up isolating these people from revolutionary influence. If one does it too hard to get over from one side, it will probably be difficult going the other way too. This campaign led to Sigurd Allern’s resignation as a chairman, replaced by a strictly reluctant Pål Steigan. Steigan is – despite intense bitterness over what he saw as a damaging settlement – not only negative. He believes that a firming of the party was necessary, following that the two first years (1973-75) became too relaxed. In the aftermath of the settlement the party undertook big tasks, amongst them a campaign to transform Klassekampen (the Class Struggle) into a daily newspaper. It may be a small paradox that the party had its peak, regarding membership numbers and most likely also in the amount of working effort dedicated to the party – in this period which both Steigan and others has summarized as most dogmatic and sectarian. But isn’t it impossible to imagine this type of sacrifice and dedication without a strong zeal and conviction? Maybe the leadership became overconfident as a result of

steady progress, and could have averted the crises if they had taken better care of both effort and dedication?

5. The meeting grind

Steigan calls the meeting culture in AKP (M-L) a “meeting mill” and that there were far too many meetings. Steigan’s young son used to call him “the meeting man”. According to Steigan’s own notes, in 1976 alone, he took part in: 50 meetings with the worker’s committee, 25 meetings in the central committee (three of which lasted for the entire weekend), 2 political meetings that lasted 2-3 days, a congressional meeting that lasted 3-4 days, 22 small team meetings, and at least 50 miscellaneous meetings, union meetings. This is not to mention a few meetings that dealt with assorted topics, like the Albanian party congress (which lasted for 14 days), meetings with foreign parties, guest meetings and so on.

A major excess of the meetings were the internal party meetings. Steigan claims that the ML movement had a very strong believe in meetings, but that most of the time spent in these meetings was in reality wasted.

6. Debate Style

Steigan says that the ML movement had an unfortunate debate style. According to him, it was cocky, very tough and unforgiving. Often in a style which was referred to as “the style of hard strikes”. Steigan suggests that it would have been a lot better if it had been less arrogant and more relaxed.

7. The Hamster Wheel

Steigan says that the leadership style in AKP (M-L) was defined by many directives and very little flexibility for the local chapters. He calls these directives a “hailstorm of papers over the chapters”. Each month, a thick manual was sent to the party chapters.

This is why Steigan now sees that a Maoist organization ought to have a greater degree of operational freedom and flexibility as its basis. He looks towards a leadership style that to a large degree summarizes experiences and inspires through examples, rather than firm directives from the center. Steigan describes an AKP calendar full of duties through a long line of special days, obligatory meetings, discussions and campaigns. Instead, says Steigan, a small organization with powerful enemies should not binds its forces, but rather strike quickly here and there, choosing times and places and being flexible. To bind forces is opposed to what Mao outlined in his guerrilla strategy.

Early in 1978, Steigan received a report that they had recruited 1000 new members in 1977, but a third of these recruits were gone within one year.

8. To dig down the party

From 1976, AKP (M-L) started a movement that would make parts of the party go underground. Ever since the party congress in 1976, the party only had one official spokesperson, the party chairman Pål Steigan. Motivated by the threat of a new world war and the goal of leading a national revolutionary peoples' war, the party was prepared for illegality and persecution.

Steigan claims he agreed that security politics were the correct way to go, but he said that it was idiotic to make parts of the party go underground. He hits especially hard against classified directives where the members were divided into four categories: 1. Known members and the spokesperson, 2. Known member, normal members, 3. Closeted members, who sympathized with the movement, and 4. Closeted members who never openly sympathized with the party.

Steigan writes that a few in the party wanted 90% of the members to be in the fourth category, while his own suggestion was to recruit more people as spokespeople and create more order within the mass membership.

In the book, Steigan writes that this classification was one of the silliest things they could do. He claimed that if there would be war, the classification would not have helped AKP (M-L). On the contrary, he said that this would isolate the party from the people and all but a few of the closest contacts with the masses could have supported the party. He also claimed that this would have made it easy to round up and crush a party that was so isolated from the people, regardless of how good the security was that they practiced. Steigan further describes that he means that this system recreated the conditions for sectarianism. When people could be secret communists and never held accountable for the party's politics, it was open for sectarian positions. The fourth category never needed to expose their politics publicly, so they did not need to worry about what people in the street or their colleagues thought about the party. According to Steigan, people also used this as an easy excuse to simply disappear when they decided they were "tired of being communists".

9. Economic crisis

Steigan devoted a great deal of his book to the huge economic crisis that afflicted AKP (M-L) in 1978. It is still not clear what the causes of this were. Steigan was—as the chairman—taken by surprise when the party’s financial officers presented a budgetary deficit of 20 million (in 2016 kroners). They had used way too much money here and there. Steigan mentions a few examples, without getting to the bottom of the matter.

The newsletter *Klassekampen* was a big drain on the ML movement’s economy. The party leadership had said no to state funding (“the enemy’s sugarcoated bullets”) of the newsletter on principle and had insisted that the members’ money and labor should remain free. Additionally, *Oktober Forlag* (The October Publishing Company) was also a large drain on resources—under Tron Øgrim’s leadership, many books were printed without anybody buying them.

Steigan depicts a large party economy with several party businesses and varieties that in the grand scheme worked as independent machines. There was very little control and some of the leading people (including Tron Øgrim and Sverre Knutsen) had their own political hobbies that demanded large expenses with little outcome and that had not reflected on the bigger picture.

Steigan says that while he wanted to step down as the chairman after the economic crisis, he was simply not allowed to. The party’s treasurer, on the other hand, was allowed to step down and was replaced by an incredibly reluctant Sverre Knutsen. Three years later, Knutsen left the party with a critique of the party for having been too disinterested in the struggle, for their critical perspective of Stalin, and for the support of Deng revisionism in China. Steigan believes that Sverre Knutsen betrayed the leftists in AKP (M-L) when he would have been the natural choice for their leadership. In 1984, a stream of members left the party, citing revisionism, but they never organized any concrete projects after leaving.

Steigan claims that the leadership lost its authority in 1978. This was the end of Marxism-Leninism as a “charismatic movement”.

10. Dependence on and views of China

Steigan writes that AKP(M-L) developed a dependence on China and Albania which they would quickly regret. Shortly after Mao’s death, the so called “Gang of Four” organized a coup in China. Tron Øgrim and the AKP leadership bought most of the rhetoric surrounding the “Gang of Four”. In the transition period

under Hua Guofeng, China addressed the Gang of Four and resolved their conflicts, but did not attack their counterrevolutionary character.

Steigan considers Øgrim's two long articles about the Gang of Four in the party's newspaper, Røde Fane [The Red Banner] as "intellectual acrobatics" and "a house of cards" that ought to be torn down. He also claims that Øgrim's (unsigned) articles tied AKP(M-L) to the leadership of China's communist party in the fall of 1976.

Steigan asks the question of whether or not it would have been possible to "take it easy" and wait a little before taking a position on the party struggle in a country on the other side of the planet. Steigan's goal in the party congress of 1980 was to have no major discussions on China. In the final analysis, the party appeared to have a friendly relationship with China up until the massacre at Tiananmen Square in 1989—which Klassekampen and AKP(M-L) denounced as a fascist oppression on the part of the Chinese state. He does not even discuss the possibility that what had happened in 1976 was a bourgeois counterrevolution.

Conclusion

In addition to organizing Steigan's view on the 3 positives and 10 negatives of the party, there are also a few other issues to consider:

It is interesting to see that of all the leaders in the party during the time Steigan writes about, nobody wanted to be the front-leader. Tromn Øgrim flatly refused, Steigan was more or less forced and wanted to step down from the start. Sigurd Allern stepped down freely after the resolution with right deviation and not even Sverre Knutsen sought the position. Steigan writes that the women's movement in 1984 kicked in unlocked doors. Steigan happily gave up his position as the chairman.

If nothing else, it dismantles the myth of power hungry and corrupt "Stalinists". It shows also that there was a collective group that held power in the party and not a single "party owner"—unlike most foreign parties. But doesn't it also reveal a weakness in the party when the most active people in it are not willing to step forward or hold responsibilities?

It is also interesting that Steigan writes that in 1984, the party's most important properties were no longer directly control by the party. The paper Klassekampen took in millions in donations and was edited

according to so-called “editorial discretion”—wherein the editor was given full freedoms in daily operations and content control. All of the sudden, it was Klassekampen’s editor—former chairman Sigurd Allern (!)—who controlled the absolute most of human and economic resources in the movement. This set the stage for the large struggles over Klassekampen in the 90s, which culminated in open war over the editorship in 1997.

Steigan also describes how important election work was for him and that his prioritization of Rød Valgallianse [Red Election Alliance] and the election struggle 1979 to a large degree happened without the engagement of the rest of the party leadership. Steigan writes that at the time, he claimed that the way out of the party crisis was with more external political work, while the rest of the leadership wanted to prioritize “internal work”.

There is a clear contradiction in Steigan’s account of AKP(M-L) in the 80s. On the one hand, he portrays a deep crisis within the party: economic crisis and a nearly bankrupt and broken leadership unit (“fellowship destroyed”), many leave the party with passive critiques from “the left”. From outside, the upheavals in China and the collapse of the international ML movement must have had a strong influence upon the situation in AKP(M-L). The party reached its peak just four years after its foundation, at a time that coincided with what Steigan calls the sectarian period.

On the other hand, Steigan seeks to frame the AKP in the 80s as a more mature party: a party that has resolved its issues with “sectarianism”, was anchored in the everyday Norwegian experience, and took part in important struggles. Steigan nearly suggests a “friendly” feminism politics that met open doors when the old “diamond gang” in the leadership was on the way out of the machine of their own making.

Steigan deals first with a comprehensive crisis when restructuring politics and it appears that he wants to convince readers that he was satisfied with the changes and developments—but then declares that by 1990 the party had lost all relevance for him. This description has a poor grasp of the situation. He gives no explanation as to why what he describes as a largely positive development has ended with him saying that the party is no longer relevant. How is it that a positive development and maturation led to the party being unimportant? Or does Steigan mean that these were just two different processes operating independently from one another?

It is tempting to think that Steigan neither can nor wants to answer these questions. Steigan's book is his conclusion for the movement. He seems finished with the ML movement, and that's OK.

All experiences can be helpful for today's communists, but the way we must go cannot be identical to the way anyone else has gone before us. New communists are probably eager to listen to as many stories from earlier struggle as possible, but to paraphrase Marx: it's about creating new histories, not interpreting that which has already been written