To Commemorate or Not: The Finnish Labor Movement and the Memory of the Civil War in the Interwar Period

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The Finnish labor movement suffered heavy losses in the Civil War and especially in its aftermath. After the war, it was under the strict control of the White regime. However, the first steps in its revival were taken already in late spring of 1918. In some municipalities, the labor associations were able to start their activities properly during the fall, and some of them managed to participate in the municipal elections in December 1918. Success in the parliamentary elections in early March 1919 – the social democrats won 80 seats out of 200 – was strong encouragement for the working people, and the work of the labor movement became more efficient as arrested members were released from POW camps, publication of the labor newspapers became possible, labor associations re-established control of the Workers’ Halls during the spring of 1919, and martial law ended in June 1919.

The Division of the Labor Movement

The labor movement was not the same as before the Civil War. There had not been any major splits in the Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP) before 1917, although there had been different kinds of emphasis in the party regarding co-operation with the bourgeois parties in the defense of Finland’s autonomy in the Russian Empire.1 By 1920, there were two labor parties – the SDP and the Socialist Workers’ Party of Finland, SSTP (Suomen sosialistinen työväenpuolue) – in Finland. In addition, the Communist Party of Finland, SKP (Suomen kommunistinen puolue), worked underground in the country, although its headquarters were in Petrograd, Soviet Russia. Its leadership even claimed that it guided the activities of the SSTP.

The division of the labor movement was connected with the results of the abortive revolution and the Civil War in the winter and spring of 1918. The three parties formulated their political lines in relation to these significant events but also to the political line of the pre-Civil War labor movement and to each other. Also, the place and the moment had a strong effect on the character of the assessment; the conditions of those who had stayed in Finland were considerably different from the conditions of the leadership of the revolution and approximately 10,000 others who had escaped to Soviet Russia. In Finland, stepping away from the past and talking mainly to a bourgeois audience were vital for the labor movement wishing to restart its activities, while in Soviet Russia, the refugees attempted to adapt themselves to the doctrines and working methods of the ruling Bolsheviks and to their expectations of world revolution in the near future.

Those who had not participated in the revolution laid the basis for the re-foundation of the Social Democratic Party in the spring of 1918. Among these, Väinö Tanner had been a member of the party committee and Parliament and belonged to the prominent leadership of the SDP, while Evert Huttunen and Hannes Ryömä were not as well known. Huttunen, though, had achieved importance in the negotiations between Finnish and Russian labor movements in 1917. Ryömä, a physician by trade, made his first significant political contribution during the winter and spring of 1918 as he publicly criticized the revolutionary policy of the SDP.2

The re-founders of the SDP wanted to distance the new movement from the pre-Civil War labor movement. According to them, leadership of the old party had made a serious mistake by forsaking reform politics and cooperation with the progressive bourgeois parties in 1917 and had allowed the spread of Bolshevik ideas among the labor ranks, propagated class hatred, and started an armed revolution. The re-founders wanted to give priority to work in Parliament and the municipal councils and help the labor masses understand the significance of reform policy and cooperation with the bourgeois center parties. They regarded spontaneous activities of the labor masses as suspicious and had a tendency to reject extra-parliamentary activities or to strictly control them. The

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