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Reluctant Vanguard?

Finnish Building Workers' Unions and Strikes 1949-1973

In Finland Communist had substantial electoral support and quite strong position in trade union movement after the Second World War. Although there has been quite high propensity strike in Finland we have challenged in earlier paper the link between Communism and strikes. 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. On the other hand there are still stereotypical interpretations about crucial communist involvement and influence organising strikes or some other ways making strikes happen.

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.

In this paper we look at 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 trade union in Finland – prepare, look and organise strikes in 1950s, 1960s and 1970s? In order to do that we look at archival material of Finnish Communist Party (Suomen Kommunistinen Puolue, SKP) and its trade union section.

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 the Second World War. There is quite good access to Communist sources in Finland. The description and analysis is here based mainly on the sources of political committee and trade union section of SKP.