

## Notes on Maoism in Iceland

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The North Atlantic island of Iceland saw organised Maoism came a decade after its European appearance with the formation of the KSML in August 1972. It arose out of the drive mainly new radicals, added by a sprinkling of more experienced activists, unhappy with the existing Left and partly inspired by the vibrancy of the Nordic Maoist experience.

“We intend to strengthen and expand this communist organisation with the revolution as a subject for study and work; then we intend to establish a communist party. The soil for this movement is excellent.”<sup>i</sup>

SigurddurJon Olafsson, formerly of the People’s Alliance, the movement’s spokesman and its birth, announced the publication of the group would be *Stettabarattan* (the Class Struggle). Kristjan Gudlaugsson, its then young editor recalled:

“When I was a young man in the 1960s, things were slowly changing partly due to the world situation, the Vietnam war and later, the student revolts in Europe. Earlier than that, we had heard of the struggle in Africa and the struggle for freedom which was rampant at that time, the war in Alger, Nkrumah and Ghana, maybe the first African state that got sovereignty and after that we turned our eyes sort of to Africa. We felt that we had something in common with the people in Africa and there was a lot of sympathy with the struggle”<sup>ii</sup>

He had studied in Sweden and continued his activism upon his returned to Iceland - a not uncommon precedent: The Icelandic communist movement can be traced back to November 1918 when two Icelandic students at Copenhagen University, Brynjólfur Bjarnason and Hendrik S. Ottósson, became political radicals after participating in a Copenhagen street riot.<sup>iii</sup>

The echo of the past was evident in the 1970s, commentators thought it worth noting of the young radicals, several of them study in Gothenburg (Göteborg), Sweden's second biggest city, a more likely environment for young Marxist-Leninist activists than Reykjavik and were relatively young in their twenties. [According to a Wikipedia entry, the group originally called themselves the Göteborg Group]. Back in Iceland, they were briefly known as the Communist Movement M-L (Kommúnistahreyfingin M-L; KHML); Formal organization in August 1972 saw them renamed the Kommúnistasamtökin marxistarnir-lenínistarnir (better known as KSML).

Great emphasis was placed on studying the theory of theory and applying it to Icelandic reality. Under the slogan "tight against class", special attempts were made to define which social groups were revolutionary in nature. In particular, Joseph Stalin was lauded as a role model and political leader.

The work of the organization during the early years was marked by efforts to keep the political line pure with strict discipline and denied all cooperation (or contamination) with other parties, such as within the organization of military opponents or trade unions. KSML therefore strongly emphasized the fight against the Alliance, but especially the other leg of the Maoist movement, EIK (ml) and the People's Party.

The KFI (ml) Communist Party of Iceland (Marxist–Leninist) / Kommúnistaflokkur Íslands (m-l) had been established in April 1976, with 30 delegates mainly KSML members. The Chairman was Gunnar Andrússon and General Secretary Kristján Guðlaugsson. The publication *Stéttabaráttan* (Class Struggle) was continued from KSML days. The KFI (ml) had close fraternal relations with the Swedish KPML(r).

Kristjan Guðlaugsson:

"Demonstrations were carried out in connection with different national issues that were happening at that time, for instance during the summer of 1968 when there was a demonstration against a NATO meeting in Reykjavik or during the demonstrations against the US military base at Reykjavik. The 1st of May, which is a Labour Day was also used by the anti-apartheid groups to demonstrate and to inform the Icelandic population about what was going on in Southern Africa."

"... here in Iceland there were solidarity actions that were not only focused on Southern Africa but rather the Third World people and of course the struggle in Southern Africa was a due part of it and that was in the early 70s and 80s. ... they had collections of money and they collaborated with the Nordic Movements and they contributed to their collections because Iceland is a very small country with 300,000 people and it was 250,000 people at that time and that is like the size of Botswana. So

at that time we did not have the backbone to mobilize but we tried to be in contact with the Nordic groups.”<sup>iv</sup>

Trans Nordic co-operation was a feature of the ML movement across the culturally related and historic ties between northern European states, seen in the relationship between movements and to the extent that EIK(ml) the later Icelandic marxist-leninist organisation were often regarded as a younger sibling to the Norwegian AKP(m l). At the beginning of the decade when the Norwegian Maoists began to return to Iceland, they initially joined the People's Party with a view to making it a maoist organization. It turned out to be more difficult than they had imagined. Other students who had allegiance to trotskyism in their studies, for example, in Sweden, Germany and France, also began organizing entrism work. The struggle of these two streams ended with the Maoists leaving the organization in 1973 and the Icelandic student who had studied in Norway forming their own organization under the name of the Einingarsamtök kommúnista (marx-lenínistar), the organization became better known under the acronym EIK (ml).

There was an established left presence in the country. In the autumn of 1968, the People's Alliance (which had previously existed as a loose electoral alliance dominated by the revisionists) began to operate as a party that wanted to sever ties with Moscow. In the parliamentary elections of 1974 there were 20,924 votes for (the increasingly left social-democratic) People's Alliance, and 10,345 votes for the Social Democrats. This compared with 121 votes for a Maoist group, and even the Trotskyists received 200 votes.

In the early 1970s Iceland attracted international coverage because of its expansion of the territorial waters (eventually to 200 miles) to preserve its fishing industry – with fish providing around 80% of the country's exports. When an island of 200,000 then took to defend these violated waters against the fishing fleet of the Federal German Republic and Great Britain the British media being full of references to a “Cod War”.

The Norwegian journal *Class Struggle* reported on a joint statement from EIK(ml), the Communist League of Union (M-L) and AKP(ML), Workers' Communist Party (ML):

“Our sister organisations are closely linked in a series of struggles – in the fight against the superpowers' increasing military activity in waters close to our two countries, in the fight for the extension of our fishing limits and in the fight for the defence of resources essential for the survival of most of our peoples.”<sup>v</sup>

EIK(ml) had attended the first Joint meeting of Nordic Marxists-Leninists<sup>vi</sup> that occurred in January 1975 at Arhus as a new Icelandic marxist-leninist organisation founded at a congress at the beginning of 1975. Also, in attendance were organisations from the Faroe Islands, Finland, Norway, Sweden and hosts, the Communist League of Denmark. A

communiqué, published in different language edition, containing a statement on the international situation and a call to strengthen the struggle against modern revisionism.

In its short history EIK(ml) maintained fraternal relations with Workers' Communist Party (Norway), Communist Party of Germany/Marxists–Leninists, Marxist–Leninist League of Denmark, Communist Party of Sweden, amongst other parties as its international alignment altered. The party viciously opposed Soviet social-imperialism as well as American imperialism, opposed other Icelandic communist parties which it found to be revisionist and held a staunchly pro-China line, until the Sino-Albanian split, when it sided with the party of Labor of Albania. Messages of greetings from the Communist Union of Iceland (ML), were sent to meetings of the parties who are working for the creation of an Albania-oriented International throughout 1977 such as the Third Party Congress of the KPD / ML in May 1977.<sup>vii</sup>

In July 1977, Rote Morgen, newspaper of the KPD/ML reported that "Delegation of the Central Committee of the KPD / ML visits Iceland".<sup>viii</sup> However, there was no engagement with the Canadian organised International rally of Albanian aligned parties held in Montreal in April the following year.

Chairman of Communist League of Union (ML) / EIK (ml), Ari Trausti became politically active during his studies in Norway, where he arrived in 1968. He claims to have returned home from the age of 24 at the end of 1972 and employed teaching in elementary school in Eyrarbakki [pretty little fishing village on the south coast of Iceland] and later at a high school in Reykjavik, the national capital.

" for some of us, the Republic did not think it was on the right political line. As a result, a group of young people founded what were then sometimes called Maoist organizations, the Communist Unity (Marx Leninists) .... At the same time there were Communist organizations Marxist-Leninists, KSML, and several other groups; however, probably no more than four organizations in all. They were a bit fighting among themselves but not always, people were looking for the right line." <sup>ix</sup>

Referring to the explosion of micro groups of different ideologies that populated even the small island state, former Secretary General of the Communist Party of Iceland, Kristjan Gúdlaugsson explained,

"In the beginning they were rather unstructured....Even if these groups were divided among themselves regarding the Icelandic politics, they all agreed and worked together in solidarity with the people of Africa, Asia and South America and so on. So, there was no difference in opinion on these issues. It was only the Icelandic issues that divided them." <sup>x</sup>

This is what is sometimes referred to [in Iceland] as *the Wild Left*, groups of people who intended to build a political party to the left of the Alliance that, "although we have become mostly social democratic" observed Ari Trausti Guðmundsson.

Factional disputes with the main Maoist organization KSML were an important part of the work. In contrast to KSML, EIK (ml) chose to work with and within a wider organization, such as the Vietnam Movement, the Women's Movement, the Confederate Opposition and the Trade Unions. The organization managed to gain influence in colleges and universities. A great emphasis was placed on scholarly studies with study circles and the publication of various brochures on the theory of science. From 1975 EIK (ml) published the newspaper Verkalýðsblaðið (the working people's paper).

However, the Icelandic organisations exhibited no sign of progress as the second half of the 1970s saw the beginning of the movement's decline, for a variety of reasons as the radical wave in the West was beginning to erode, and in Iceland there was an even smaller social base to draw upon to replenish the movement. International factors added to the mix : Chinese and Albanian controversy over the "Three-Worlds Theory" and subsequent political break-up of their relationship was compounded by China's developing political relationship with the United States , followed by the disputes and armed conflicts of Chinese , Khmer and Vietnamese communists and domestically China's retreat and repudiation of the previous decade, played a big part in extinguishing the passion and fire of many radicals: it finally shattered the Maoist international constellation.

The EIK(ML)'s Report at its 4th Congress, held in 1979 in Reykjavik, noted, "During the last year or two the ML movement in Iceland has shown tendencies to stagnate. EIK(ML) became more politically isolated than before".

In their estimation the KFI (ML) – described as previously a bundeist ultra-leftist organisation that evolved towards ML positions – had also weakened, and noted there had been hardly any movement towards the unification of the two groups.

Criticisms raised about the performance of the EIK(ML) were that it had too few working class members, and that its United Front policy had been implemented "too exclusive, inflexible and sectarian" manner and "our propaganda which has not been sufficiently adapted to Icelandic conditions". Internal debate questioned the sectarianism and tendency towards dogmatism, specifically the lack of concrete research and the mechanical attitude towards inner-party democracy.

In all, the "Left" radicalism practiced by both organisations was said to have been dogmatism, isolationist in work and far too rigid in organisation, and fatally an inability to formulate a ML policy in accordance with Icelandic circumstances.

Despite this critique, in April 1980, EIK(ML)'s extraordinary congress dissolved the organisation in order to unite with the Communist Party of Iceland (ML) / KFI (ML) / Kommúnistaflokkur Íslands (m-l).

It is in the struggle against these errors and by making use of positive experiences that a common basis for unity was found. An *Inaugural Declaration* of July 1980 noted having formed one organisation either side still reserved disagreements on some issues concerning the history of the two organisations, on certain political and organisational issues.

“We want to make the organisation work more smoothly and open, to work with more people on the creation of a communist party, formulate an “Icelandic” Marxist-Leninist policy and be more daring in our mass work. It is obvious that one has to experiment, use vivid struggles of ideas, discussions and varied work in front organisations to be able to formulate more concrete policies and find new ways in communist mass work.”

May 1980 saw the merge of two organisational streams of what had constituted the Maoism movement in Iceland to form the Communist Union / KS / Kommúnistasamtökin. Its' publication was *Verkalyosblaioio* - the Workers Paper. It was a ML study and propaganda group, mainly Reykjavik-based, and it ceased publication of *the Workers Paper* in March 1983. Ending the publishing history started in 1975 under EIK(ml) .<sup>xi</sup>

Ari Trausti chairman of Eik(ml) continued to lead the merger of the two Icelandic Maoist organizations. A post he continued in until its dissolution around the mid-80s.

The 2016 October elections, saw elected to Althingi , the national parliament of Iceland, Ari Trausti Guðmundsson, a geophysicist, for the Left Green movement. Known in his own right for his subsequent political career, his brother Guðmundur Guðmundsson (b. 1932), better known as Erró, is the best-known postmodern painter and pop artist of Iceland.

Ari Trausti was reflective of its fate:

Among other things, this political line may not always fit Icelandic reality and the other was that the people who stood there were growing out of the grass, the students were suddenly ready for education, started working, along came family and children and enthusiasm might not be the same. But on the other hand, it should be seen that the policy was in many respects a political shipwreck. The mood waned and we might lack the foresight to become a real political force. For example, we never bid for elections, so we thought we were small and too weak to do so. <sup>xii</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> *Visir* August 9<sup>th</sup> 1972. Newspaper of the Independent Party

<sup>ii</sup> Kristjan Gúdlaugsson interview conducted by Proscovia Svärd October 24<sup>th</sup> 2008.  
<https://www.liberationafrica.se/intervstories/interviews/kristjan-gudlaugsson/?by-name=1>

<sup>iii</sup> Twists And Turns In The History Of The Icelandic Communist Movement. The Reykjavik Grapevine, February 15, 2012 <https://grapevine.is/mag/articles/2012/02/15/twists-and-turns-in-the-history-of-the-icelandic-communist-movement/>

<sup>iv</sup> Interview by Proscovia Svärd , 24th October 2008.  
<https://www.liberationafrica.se/intervstories/interviews/kristjan-gudlaugsson/?by-name=1>

<sup>v</sup> Class Struggle Klassenkampft June 18-24 1975

<sup>vi</sup> *Peking Review* No.5 January 31st 1975

<sup>vii</sup> *The Workers' Advocate* Vol. 7, No 1, March 10, 1977  
<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/workers-advocate/7-1.html#article5702>

<sup>viii</sup> *Rote Morgen* #28 8.7.1977

<sup>ix</sup> <https://andriki.is/2016/11/19/felagi-ari-er-traustur/>

<sup>x</sup> Interview by Proscovia Svärd October 24th 2008.  
<https://www.liberationafrica.se/intervstories/interviews/kristjan-gudlaugsson/?by-name=1>

<sup>xi</sup> *Verkalýðsblaðið* Archive [http://timarit.is/view\\_page\\_init.jsp?publd=352&lang=is](http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?publd=352&lang=is)

<sup>xii</sup> <https://andriki.is › 2016/11/19 › felagi-ari-er-traustur>