

# **An Introduction to the Great Miners' Strike in Kiruna, Malmberget and Svappavaara - An Artistic Inquiry into The Great Miners' Strike and Solidarity Actions**

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On December 9, 1969, the great miners' strike erupted in the ore fields of Norrbotten in the far north of Sweden. It was a wildcat strike in which 4800 miners at LKAB's (Loussavaara-Kiirunavaara AB) mines in Svappavaara, Kiruna and Malmberget, halted work for 57 days. The reasons for the strike were many: the miners were subject to a harsh time-study system, UMS (Universal Maintenance Standards), that LKAB used to push down piece rates. Real wages had fallen steadily for fifteen years and the workers now demanded fixed wages. The company structure of LKAB was strictly hierarchical. In the context of the strike, this was illustrated by the 31 "leadership tenets." For instance, tenet 29 declared that an employee should simply follow orders, "A manager should practice his leadership in such a way that a non-manager merely needs to follow orders." By giving their managers this leadership training, LKAB implemented a new mode of work organization in the hopes that the assembly line (Fordism) would rationalize production. LKAB became state-owned in 1957, but despite this the work environment had noticeably deteriorated due to harsh rationalization measures. The miners' cabins, which contained locker rooms and communal dining rooms in which the miners socialized during breaks, were eliminated. "We are not machines." was one of many slogans in circulation on placards in Kiruna during the strike.



Photo: Satura. Documentation by Margareta Vinterheden and Alf Israelsson.

Industrial workers had achieved a higher standard of living due to the general increase in societal welfare in the postwar years. The Swedish *folkhemmet* (people's home), the vision of the welfare state, was known across the world, especially for its egalitarian ideals. Thus it was assumed internationally that workers at Sweden's largest state-owned company labored under the best conditions in the world. In reality, miners were subject to a very dangerous work environment that included noxious diesel fumes in the mines, and their wage growth was inferior to that of many other industrial workers.

The miners' strike also challenged the "spirit of unity" – the idea of state and industry working together to create harmony on the labor market. State-owned LKAB was a member of SAF (Swedish Employers Association). One demand made by the miners was that LKAB immediately withdraw from the organization. The strike also protested the miners' own trade union. The workers wanted the right to negotiate locally, rather than through Grängesberg, in central Sweden, where the offices of the miners' union were located. The largest trade union in Norbotten, Gruvtolvan, was not represented on the board of the miners' union. In general, the workers considered the union too weak to effectively put pressure on the large mining compa-

nies. Thus the strike was a strike against several parties: LKAB, the state and the miners' own collective, and L.O. (The Swedish Trade Union Confederation). The strike would shake up the social democratic welfare state and a few years afterward, in the 1970s, and L.O. began internal reforms. The most concrete change to come out of the struggle and the wildcat strikes was the Law on Codetermination in the Workplace (MBL in Swedish), which passed in 1976. The push to increase productivity, along with the introduction of Fordism at industrial plants around Europe, was challenged by industrial workers who refused to work in response to rationalizations, deteriorating pay conditions and alienation.

In northern Italy, "the two red years," ran from 1968 through 1969. A wave of strikes around Sweden, starting with the port workers' strike in Gothenburg in November 1969, gave the miners' strike added momentum. The year 1968 also witnessed a general uprising against authority. Young people challenged the norms and power structures in society at large, as well as those of a social democracy they felt was outdated. The new left wanted to see a more engaged social democracy, one that took cues from global political movements.

The miners' strike received broad popular support. Many political groups visited the ore fields during the strike: sociologists, journalists, activists and cultural workers.



"We are no machines", Photo: Press TT.

Swedish public television, which had recently become a two-channel system, sent journalists to the scene. However, the new channel, TV 2, couldn't broadcast that far north. There was plenty of media attention nationally, but the miners weren't able to see themselves in the various programs that covered the strike. Instead they listened to Norbottenskvarten (a local radio program). The news was heavily regulated and controlled by the state-run radio and TV – this resulted in the image of the strike conveyed in media being anything but “objective.”

For many young people, the miners came to represent the industrial working class who would revolutionize society. Different political groups had hopes as to what the miners might be able to realize ideologically for them and for society. For instance, some believed that the miners' struggle could result in a revolutionary systemic critique of both the Swedish spirit of unity between industry and labor, as it was part of the nascent anti-capitalist movement. KFML (The Communist Union of Marxist-Leninists) offered their support by spreading propaganda and providing ideological guidance. The party played an important role during the Vietnam War by organizing solidarity work through the united NLF Groups (Vietnamese Na-



Photo: Satura. Documentation by Margareta Vinterheden, Alf Israelsson.

(On the image: The filmmaker Margareta Vinterheden interviews the strike committee member Elof Luspa.)

tional Liberation Front). Members of KFML were also active in collecting means for the strike fund so that the miners could continue to strike when they didn't receive strike support from L.O.

Despite many political groups wanting to actively support the strike, the strike committee was clear that this was their strike and that no outside groups should be allowed to compromise their unity. Everyone in the group fought to achieve a united front. Appearing united strengthened their negotiating position against LKAB and made it possible for the miners to negotiate for themselves, without the involvement of L.O., as they were suspicious of the union's stance on the conflict. The strike meetings were organized according to a direct democratic principle termed "big meetings". The big meeting was the workers' highest decision-making authority during the strike.

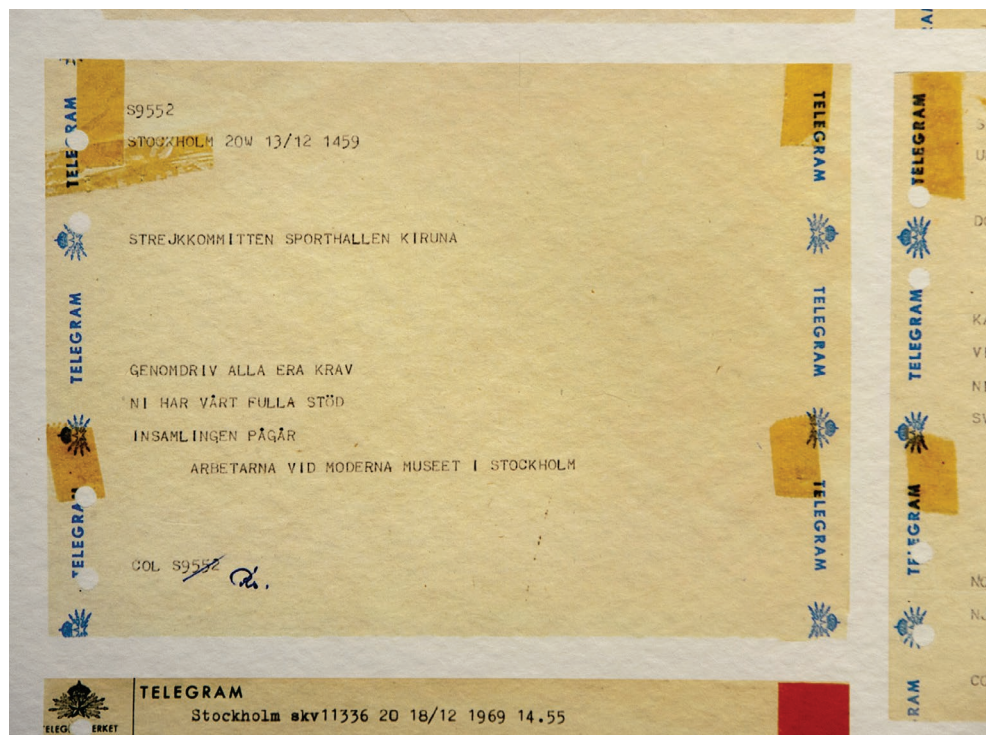
The outwardly united front would eventually cause the strike to crumble. There were many reasons why the front didn't hold, too many to detail in this article. In short, supporters of social democratic policy wanted to achieve a smooth ending to the strike after pressure from the Social Democratic party and L.O. There was fear that the wildcat strikes would threaten the basis for the spirit of unity, introduced after Saltsjöbadsavtalet (an agreement made in the 1930s between industry and L.O., supported by the government). The strike could also be used by foreign powers – the Swedish government maintained good relations with the US during the Cold War, due the threat posed by the Soviet Union. There was a well-worn conflict between Communists and Social Democrats fighting for their ideological home base at the various union chapters in the mining towns. Malmberget was more oriented toward Communists, while Social Democrats ruled the roost in Kiruna. The state secret service IB (the information bureau) oversaw the strike through wire-tapping on site. Even media worked to splinter workers. Miners often felt that journalists were painting a false image of the strike, or that they held back because media was state-run. At the time, many state institutions were run through with repressive tolerance against voices deemed too radical.

Alternative channels and forms of distribution were created in reaction to state control of public institutions. For example Filmcentrum emerged in May 1968 to organize the independent filmmakers, and provide production support, as the Swedish Film Institute was considered too conservative for experimental activities. According to Filmcentrum's motto, filmmakers should go out into society and document factories and industry using simple means in order to create quick documentary reports. A concrete suggestion for making the film project available was to use existing channels of distribution. Thus an inventory of all film projectors in all Folkets Hus (community centers) and other public venues across Sweden was made.

Through the socialist organization Clarté, the NLF-movement organized exhibitions in Stockholm where artworks were auctioned off to benefit the Vietnamese

cause. The miners' strike contributed to a continued solidarity effort and more experimental institutional activity was initiated at places like the Modern Museum and the City Museum in Stockholm in order to draw in the new social and political movements. The Modern Museum started a parallel project called "Filialen", a collaboration between the museum director Pontus Hultén and the intendent Pär Stolpe. For three years (1971-1973) "Filialen" provided space for a radical pedagogy intended to broaden the notion of visual art and to encourage a public not accustomed to contemporary art.

In this spirit of solidarity work and radicalism surrounding the miners' strike, benefit shows, fundraisers and art auctions were arranged at various places in Sweden to help the miners. At the Modern Museum an evening of solidarity was arranged with popular singers and artists. The Museum of Sundsvall collected art for sale, Galleri Heland in Stockholm also collected art for an auction. The author Sara Lidman played a key role in these solidarity efforts. At the first strike meeting in Kiruna she donated money from the proceeds of her and Odd Uhrbom's book *Gruva* [Mines] as a first contribution toward a strike fund. The money collected around the country was then put in a bank account opened for the strike fund and the artworks not sold were sent up to the strike committee. However, the strike committee decided to not sell the art, instead the miners kept them as a memento of the gift. The miners had collected more than 4.5 million Swedish kronor for their strike fund and they didn't feel that they needed to sell the art. Rather they wanted to keep it for the historical record. The miners' strike art collection consists of graphics,



Document: "Telegram". Translated quote: "You have our full support, The workers at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm"

paintings and sculptures. The collection documents one of Sweden's most famous strikes; it also documents the solidarity movement that emerged around this time in 1968.

Cultural workers launched several other initiatives during the strike, often solidarity efforts that were welcomed by the miners, but criticized by media and organizations that received support from the Social Democratic Party. Independent theater groups from Stockholm were on site to perform theater. The NJA group (Nils Johan Andersson) staged a play produced by Sweden's National Theatre, Dramaten, that was intended to be for the state-owned Norrbottens Järnverk AB in Luleå; when the strike broke out the ensemble decided to also perform it at the strike sites in the ore fields. This was harshly criticized by the board of Dramaten, which resulted in actors quitting their jobs there. Narren Theatre was also on site for a couple of months and staged a play *Solidaritet Arbetarmakt* [Solidarity, Worker power] in dialogue with workers at Malmberget. Filmmakers Alf Israelsson and Margareta Vinterheden who had grown up in the area made the documentary *Gruvstrejken 69/70* (the miners' strike 69/70). The filmmakers Lena Ewert and Lars Westman were given the responsibility to film the closed internal strike meetings, their engagement resulted in the documentary *Kamrater motståndaren är välorganiserad* [Comrades, the enemy is well organized], a film made in collaboration with a special film and editing committee consisting of miners.

The history of the great miners' strike is known within the contemporary political left movements and is still present in the collective memory of the older generation. But for the general public, it is rather unknown, and one could rather suspect that the attempts by powerful forces to hide its history have prevailed. In the current status quo of the neoliberal society, it is difficult to comprehend the ideologies that were at stake during the 68 movement, particularly as this period is remembered as the ideal state of politics in Sweden. It represents a democratic system with more social justice than we see in contemporary politics. However, the event of the strike, at the time of evolving criticism by the 68 politics, could have been addressed publicly by the Social Democratic Party, as a self-analytical example towards its past conflicts with the left to regain momentum. But the Social Democratic labour movement has never had the ability to self reflect over its hegemonic and reformist role; it is now occupied with moving to the middle politics in post capitalism renouncing ideologies of the past as it seeks to regain power.

Often the historic event of a strike is generally spoken of in terms of nostalgia, but to address historical struggles as pure nostalgia diminishes the work that was put at stake for those active in the opposition. The outstanding and broad social engagement and activism for the strikers cause is particularly interesting as it included different fields of culture workers who mirrored the situation in various works. In retrospect, the strike event contributed to the radicalization of the general cultural landscape in Sweden, which could fuel the spirit of art workers struggles. Actors



Photo: Documentation by Pål Sommelius. "The Miners' Strike Art Collection" (at Gällivare museum), Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm.

from various cultural fields stepped up to support the strike and thus promote a more equal society. Curators were putting solidarity posters up publicly. Theatre companies put up plays in the mining district and filmmakers documented the course of the strike on site. Artists and musicians organized petitions and collections for the strikers in Stockholm; at cultural institutions experimental activities were established to capture the new social and political movements.

*Since 2010, artist, Ingela Johansson (Sweden), has been working on her investigation "What happened to the art of the strike?". She examined the great miners' strike of 1969/70 as it related to the general radicalization of the artistic and cultural landscape in the wake of the 1968 uprising. The project has taken various forms, in which Johansson has worked with archival materials from the time of the strike. She has shown "The Miners' Strike Art Collection" (at Gällivare museum) in collaboration with Bildmuseet in Umeå (2012) and Tensta Konsthall (2013). She has also staged this material as theater, and organized "Witness seminars" in collaboration with Södertörn University in Stockholm.*

#### Note

The article is a compilation of the 500 page book, *The art of the strike, voices on cultural and political work during and after the mining strike 1969-70*. Ingela Johansson has collected documents of various kinds that use the strike as a point of departure and the actions of solidarity and support, which were carried out by artists, writers, musicians, actors, filmmakers and other groups. To these strike documents she added conversations with people who were involved in various capacities. The conversations took place between 2010 and 2013, either on site in the mining district, at other locations across the country, over telephone, Skype or email. The material on which the assemblages in the book are based consist of newspaper articles, excerpts from books, protocols, letters and more, as well as of sound-recordings from strike meetings, seminars, witness seminars, speeches and conversations. They comment on the societal events in '68 and the collective memory of the course of the strike. Ingela Johansson has collected the materials and conducted the interviews, in part with Kim Einarsson. The material has been assembled and edited in collaboration with Kim Einarsson and Martin Högstöm, who have also created the graphic design.



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