



## Book review: **A Global History of Workers' Fight for Municipal Socialism** Shelton Stromquist, 2023

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### **Abstract**

Shelton Stromquist has written a long and very rich account of the international history of local socialist activism, often called municipal socialism. Drawing on various examples, Stromquist wants to shift the focus from national parliamentary politics and centrist narratives to the local level, where the labour movement was built. At a time when local struggles such as affordable housing are once again on the agenda of progressive activists, this book offers important insights into the early local history of labour politics and inspiration for contemporary activists and municipal socialists.

### **Keywords**

Urban history, municipal socialism, labour movement

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Shelton Stromquist's book (Verso, 2023) is very rich account of the history of municipal socialism. Stromquist draws from historical examples globally to shift the readers' focus from national political narratives to local movements, such as those around affordable housing, to provide insights and to inspire contemporary activists.

When I was a child, growing up in Södermalm, Stockholm, my best friend lived at Tengdahl Street. For some reason, the street's name stuck with me. Still, it wasn't until adulthood that I learned that the street, aptly located in what was then working-class neighbourhoods close to dock-side industry, together with a nearby park was named after the legendary Stockholm municipal socialist Knut Tengdahl (1867-1935). Tengdahl was a bricklayer, a union organizer, and a social reporter. Even though he would eventually end up in the national parliament, he was first and foremost a local politician, advocating municipal voting reform and social welfare programs for municipal housing and healthcare. Tengdahl is just one of many examples of local municipal socialists around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Their commitment to, in Shelton Stromquist's words, 'remake cities into humane spaces' did leave a lasting impact. As Stromquist states, the local sphere of labour political activism has been neglected by historians, who instead have favoured the traditional national political narrative. To remedy this, Stromquist has written a massive, engaging, and vibrant volume on both the local and transnational history of municipal socialism.

Examples from Australia, Austria, England, France, Germany, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden, and the United States highlight the local character of the early labour movement. The remembrance of the Paris Commune was an important point of reference for early municipal socialists. The rapidly changing urban environment during the early period of the labour movement provided an arena for socialist reformers to raise demands for reform. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the liberals who had governed many cities faced a hard challenge from an increasingly politicized urban working class. The workers organized themselves and voted for social democrats, resulting both in large labour conflicts and the entry of the modern party system. Cities became, as Stromquist puts it 'a danger to social and political stability more generally'. Old urban elites, such as property owners, who had dictated municipal policy, were challenged by the emergence of urban labour.

The strikes and reform programs were often local in their demands, and the labour activists saw the city as an immediately accessible and relevant arena. Despite this, municipal socialism was underappreciated by the national leadership massive German Social Democratic Party, instead focusing on state policies. Local SPD branches thus had to formulate their own municipal programs, often focusing on public housing as a key reform. The debate between reformists and revolutionaries continued both in Germany and elsewhere. Eventually, the outbreak of World War I tore the Second International apart and municipal socialists and labour activists focused their attention on the domestic front, defending and trying to expand suffrage and civil liberties as well as combatting conscription and advocating economic reforms aiding the working class. Growing discontent resulted in massive collective action, often local in character. Women played important roles in these collective conflicts, whether it was protesting against conscription, trade union strikes, food riots or the rent strikes of the tenants' unions.

The revolutionary uprisings late in and after the war ended, among other things resulting in the Russian Revolution, saw workers' councils taking power in cities and municipalities. Even though these were temporary and, in several cases, brutally suppressed, they once again provided an example of how the transition to socialism could happen. Stromquist doesn't touch that much on the mid-war period, the division between social democracy and communism and the rise of fascism, but he does conclude his book with a chapter of 'Red Vienna', perhaps the best-known example of social democratic mid-war municipal socialism, with a social housing program that has lingered into our time. A few pages discuss the post-war social democratic municipal reforms during the post-war era. In this period, social democracy, at least in Europe, on a much larger scale than before managed the cities and municipalities, ends the book.

Housing is a reoccurring topic in the book, such as in German examples. Municipal socialists in the British Independent Labour Party advocated municipal ownership of land,

slum clearance and public housing. The war caused an increasing amount of agitation for housing reform and rent control in the UK and other places. As a Swede, it would have been interesting to read more about Stromquist's take on Swedish public housing programs, a cornerstone of the social democratic municipal socialist program here, but that was of course, mainly a product of the period postdating the period that Stromquist writes about. If there is something housing activists of today can learn from history, the struggle for good homes for all has been an integrated part of labour history from the beginning.

Overall, the book is an impressive achievement, and with its 850 pages, a must-have for anyone interested in labour or urban history. The book would have benefitted from a generous summary and a more extended concluding section for the whole book. At the end of my reading, I would have liked more of Stromquist's thoughts on the massive work he had put together. The book's narrative does stick together, but at times there is a tendency for the author to get lost in details, with some details being less relevant than others for the overall topic of the book. Many examples in this book were local issues, but some cases, like conscription, were perhaps more of a local campaign on a national issue. The examples are also treated quite unevenly, with some parts being too long and others too short. It is noticeable that the book is the product of a long process of data gathering and writing; at some point, you must put it all together. I am sure this book will have a long life with frequent references from historians. At least, I know I will.