

Not for sale!

Communist Party of Finland's municipal elections programme 2017

Everywhere in our country things are coming apart. This includes the scrapping of the welfare that concerns practically everyone, and in which only the rich are winners. The austerity policies of the right wing are wrecking social security, public services, the environment, workers' conditions and human rights more rapidly than ever before. Public service privatization and marketization are accelerating at both national and municipal levels. Many of these self-generated public services would, in addition to producing welfare, have added to our public finances. There is not a shred of democracy in privatized services.

At the same time increasingly more dividends and capital gains are being disbursed to capitalists. Slashing public spending does not affect weapons procurement, into which the government is pouring more billions. For those living and resident in Finland this sort of policy is unsustainable. It fuels nationalism, racism and violence. And the continual pursuit of profit leads inevitably to environmental degradation.

The reform of the social and healthcare system (known as the Sote programme) threatens to devastate the whole public service network and obliterate the constitutional right of municipalities to self-government. The CPF opposes the Sote model proposed by the government, demands that it is abandoned, and suggests an alternative programme instead. In this, basic services would be arranged in municipalities and developed by a participatory budgetary process rooted in local democracy. Specialised services would be arranged by the provinces, without being faced with compulsory assimilation.

The austerity policy of Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's so-called SOS government (referring to the names of the coalition partners – Sipilä, Orpo and Soini) requires that decisions on this be in many respects made in the municipalities. This year's local elections will not only decide who will be in control of municipalities for the next four years. They will also decide the policy direction that people want to see. What will Finnish municipalities be like in the future? Who will organise services? Who will pay taxes?

The candidates of the Communist Party of Finland will be taking part in the spring 2017 municipal elections with the express purpose of changing the political direction of our country. Power belongs to the people and not to corporations.

Participatory democracy

Finland's population has the will and knowhow to affect things in their neighbourhoods and the affairs of their own municipalities. The scope for this should be increased rather than the current centralization of decision-making. Power needs to be decentralized, and new participatory methods developed and introduced. Municipalities need to invest in regional boards, town councils, participatory budgeting and various new forms of resident participation. Referendums and municipal initiatives would also be important forms of doing this.

As many municipal inhabitants as possible must be able to be involved in different levels of decision-making. The opportunities for locals to influence matters can be improved by providing facilities free of charge for residents to use, and by enabling access to information so that they can formulate alternative proposals. Youth must be given decision-making powers on the use of their own facilities and youth work budgeting. Youth Councils must have real decision-making powers over youth work, as well as the right to attend and make presentations to municipal councils and boards.

There is a pay and salary elite being created in the municipalities within the system of trustees. The CPF believes that the ground must be laid for as many municipal residents as possible to exercise their rights to

influence their affairs. Citizens have ideas and suggestions that do not conform to old formulas. We need the courage to try out new types action with an open mind that challenge the old ways of exercising power.

In many municipalities the numbers of municipal boards and their members have been reduced. If only councillors are accepted as members of boards, the cohort of decision makers will diminish even further. At the same time, councils have delegated their decision-making powers to boards and civil servants, who in many places decide on matters that are of great importance to local residents, such as service networks.

Openness and publicity

Privatization and competitive tendering in municipalities opens the way to many forms of corruption. Decision-making at local level must from beginning to end be open and made public. When preparing matters to be decided on, there must be different alternatives made public. Residents must be allowed to influence the various options available and to make their own submissions. The CPF's candidates will not agree to the fixing of council agreements before the decision process has even begun.

Municipal operations and services have been transferred to an increasing extent to commercial institutions and outsourced to companies, and so the public exposure of decision-making has completely vanished. The CPF believes that this trend must be tackled to ensure the openness and transparency of decision-making. In many municipalities, municipal board meetings are closed and their debates may not be talked about outside the committee rooms. The CPF believes that municipal board meetings must be made public as far as possible within the framework of the law.

Revamping Sote and provincial reform

The reform of the social and healthcare system proposed by the government neglects basic services, fragments and corporatizes service packages, increases inequality and subordinates fundamental rights to private profit-making. The transferring of decision-making on basic services to provincial level distances decision-makers from local residents and removes any knowledge of local service needs. The limiting of municipalities' taxation rights undermines their income base. Using the Sote reform, the right-wing aims to give big companies carte blanche over people's money.

The reform's €3-billion savings target, absence of rights of taxation by provinces, and the subordination of provincial decisions to ministerial approval signify strict state control. In practice, this will lead to the situation where municipal mergers also aim for the concentration of services in the hands of large companies, the weakening of local services, and increasing client/patient fees. The narrowing of the health and welfare gap and equality of access to services will not be achieved.

The CPF suggests an alternative course whereby basic services are organised in municipalities as local services, and for the most part produced by them. Specialised services should be arranged in provinces without the purchaser-provider model or forced corporatizing. Service financing must be based on progressive taxation, which would be altered to include unearned income.

Services that are public and nearby

Welfare belongs to every municipal inhabitant and resident. The CPF believes that it is precisely locally produced services that ensure that they are available to everyone equally. In ramming through the Sote reform, the right-wing government is concentrating services into larger units. This will increase regional inequalities. The state subsidies given to municipalities must be increased for the production of universal local services.

Service production must not be subordinated to profit seeking. People's health or children's education must not be a moneymaking machine. Many public services generate profits, and there is no justification for selling them off for private ownership. Municipalities must be regarded as productive sectors in the own right and where returns go to a common reserve.

The municipal sector in Finland has generally moved to using private companies in its performing its debt collections. The most usual debts collected are for daycare and social and health client fees. The subjects are often municipal residents on low incomes, whose bills may end up being paid to the municipality – which has outsourced the debt collection – by withholding income support. The most commonly used debt collection agencies are multinational companies, some of which are known tax avoiders that use tax havens. The profits of debt recovery corporations are shamelessly vast, and based on bloated interest and collection costs provided for by legalised extortionate rates of interest. There is no justification for municipalities using the services of multinational debt collection companies and augmenting the profits of their owners. The CPF calls for municipalities to stop using tax-avoiding debt collection companies in both billing and recovering payments.

Employment

Municipalities in Finland play an important role in generating and promoting employment. The best way for municipalities to deal with their employment situation is to arrange the majority of their services themselves and employing local people. The austerity measures underway in municipalities are reducing permanent jobs and causing rampant unemployment. Some municipalities are even exploiting the large numbers of able-bodied unemployed people by making them work for €9 a day. In doing so municipalities are violating the law on rehabilitative employment.

Municipalities must begin experimenting with organising services in two six-hour shifts. The CPF has confidence in the results of several studies, according to which a six-hour working day enables people to manage better and decreases the amount of sickness absenteeism. History has shown that shortening the working day leads to increased productivity. Of course work sharing also promotes employment and thus increases income tax revenue. For all these reasons such experiments could be carried out without any reduction in earnings.

The government's so-called Agreement on Competitiveness undermines the terms of employment in the municipal sector in particular. The weakening of working conditions in municipal employment, which mainly comprises women, is driving down wages and compounding the problems of coping at work. In many municipalities working time is wasted due to badly functioning data systems. Cuts in expenditure in have led to employees being overworked and to rising sick leave. Stress is a real problem especially in early childhood education, teaching and social and health services. A change of policy is needed in order to develop services and invest in workers' wellbeing and skills.

Women have much at stake

Most of the cuts made by the right-wing government directly or indirectly target women. Municipal employees, such as cleaners, home carers, social workers and daycare teachers are mainly women, often underpaid. Statistics show that women usually do short-term work. As care work ceases to be society's responsibility, we find increasingly more women doing unpaid work in the home. Cuts to basic social security particularly impact the pensions of older women. Contrary to what people generally think, the social exclusion of women is a growing and serious problem in Finnish society.

The CPF proposes solutions for women to cope at work, at home and in retirement. The wages of municipal workers must be increased and work contracts made permanent. Work without pay and the erosion of working conditions in sectors predominantly employing women must be stopped. Municipalities must carry

out six-hour working day trials without loss of earnings. The state pension must be increased. Child aftercare must be organised free of charge. Social credits must be made a statutory service.

In healthcare, gynaecological services must be available to women without separate referral. Municipalities must provide free contraception to young residents. Access to testing for sexually transmitted diseases must be available without appointment, and rapid testing made possible anonymously. The abortion law must be reformed so that it is no longer mandatory to give reasons for requesting the procedure

Upgrading elderly, disability and social services

Year after year our country's right-wing government has reduced resources for elderly care and have depleted round-the-clock care homes. Older people are being required to relocate to rented one-room flats. This undoubtedly means that, increasingly, older people are abandoned, confined to their homes. The CPF calls for municipalities to have more places for treatment and care. At present the private sector can bill older people for whatever sums it wants. Enough time must be guaranteed for home carers to do their work thoroughly. The quality of care has declined continually. We call for quality care.

The ratio of carers must be at least one carer per older person in round-the-clock care. The ratio must comprise only actual carers and this requirement must be written in the municipal programme for elderly services. Preventive home visits must be brought back. By increasing numbers of staff, employees' ability to cope will improve, sickness absenteeism will drop and the quality of care will improve.

Solutions providing preventive and early assistance need to be developed and added to in social care work. The transfer of basic income support to the Social Insurance Institution must not be allowed to generate problems when people are faced with temporary financial problems. Municipalities must invest in allocating preventive and complementary income support. Communal, low threshold social services and counselling must be developed at residents' centres, youth centres, maternity clinics, daycare centres and schools.

Services for people with disabilities must always give priority to quality and suitability to users in the selection of service providers, and all essential services, such as housing services, must be removed from the scope of the Public Procurement Act. The homes of people with disabilities and older people must not be marketized.

Health for all

Health gaps in Finland are increasing at an alarming rate. Poor people find it harder to access treatment and some have dropped out of reach of the public health system. Population ageing, increasing mental health and substance abuse problems, temporary work and unemployment underscore the need for expanding and developing public health services.

Primary health care must be free for all residents.

Some health care, in particular urgent care, must also be free for people living in other municipalities. Full service emergency hospitals and other specialised medical services must not be concentrated only in a small number of centres.

Public health services must not be corporatized. We need to ensure there are a sufficient number of 24-hour treatment units. There must also be outpatient care providing substance abuse treatment and mental health services alongside institutional care.

Early childhood education, schools and learning

Every child has the right to good quality early childhood education (preschooling) and to attend school regardless of parental income or place of residence. As children grow and become school learners, we must ensure there are places for them in secondary schools. Finland can no longer afford to have any displaced young people. Lack of staff is a reality in schools, particularly primary schools. Problems of indoor air quality and mould are an everyday issue and municipalities must carry out more renovations of schools and colleges.

The Sipilä government has intervened in the ratio of children to staff in preschools. While many municipalities have not worsened this ratio, there are in practice too few staff on a daily basis. Though the workload is constantly increasing, staff numbers either remain the same or are decreasing. The impact of such decisions on child welfare is not being investigated sufficiently.

Children's subjective rights to daycare must not be limited to a part-time basis on the grounds of whether parents or a parent has work. Changes to working life require that there are more shift daycare places. There should be at least two daycare teachers and a child carer or nurse for each group of children. The needs of children requiring special support must be taken into account by reducing group sizes, and if necessary assistants must be arranged for children. We must not allow early childhood education to be played with.

Daycare must be free of charge for all children.

The basis of a primary school is that it is of sound size and close to where learners live. Over-long days are already placing too much of a burden on small children. Children must have better opportunities to access aftercare regardless of their parents' levels of income. Better attention needs to be given to the needs of learners with different backgrounds and cultures. Freedom of religion must be realised in practice and must be nondenominational.

In addition to procuring new digital equipment and programmes, sufficient budgeting is needed for the instruction and training of teachers. The technical maintenance of devices and equipment must be properly organised. Schools need to have enough network connections for using equipment.

Cuts to the secondary education budget must be reversed. The downsizing of the network of vocational colleges and high schools is increasing inequality. Almost one in every five learners who completes primary school nowadays is deprived of the possibility of further education. At the same time, the cuts have undermined the supply of teachers and the quality of teaching. The CPF calls for every child who completes primary school to be guaranteed a place in further education or apprenticeship.

Involvement in cultural and recreational services

Communists believe that municipalities should generate wellbeing on a variety of levels. Pursuing interests and hobbies free of charge would make the life more enjoyable for local residents and provide a counterbalance to everyday life. Cultural and recreational services refer to key municipal services, such as sports facilities, art exhibitions, libraries, play facilities, park stages, historical sites, theatres, museums and festivals. Well-run recreational services also help ward off social exclusion.

Libraries must be places of knowledge; the arts and civic activity open to all. For communists, libraries are some of the most important common spaces. Free public library services repay many times over what municipalities invest in them. People use libraries to learn to read and to learn about society and culture. Libraries are centres that strengthen civil society, participation and democracy. For immigrants, libraries are often the first service at hand and a door to Finnish society. Library services must not be large units centred on the main urban hubs. At their best, library services are produced as local amenities walking distance from where people live. We are calling for statutory increases to the budgets for library services and the statutory development of such services.

New forms of development, time, space and funding by cities and municipalities are needed for residents' own activities and for civil society actors to work together. It is the job of cultural and recreational services to facilitate the equal rights of residents to be heard and seen. Optimally, residents are involved in and make their presence and actions felt on our common culture. Special care must be taken to ensure that children have opportunities to pursue hobbies free of charge. Instead of sports business, we need sports facilities available for everyone to use at low cost or free.

There needs to be more support for local cultural initiatives. This means having better resources for events for local residents and for different minorities, such as independent and self-run activities by immigrants or gender and sexual minorities.

Participatory cultural and leisure services can be everything that people themselves want to designate as their own forms of activity. They are activities that promote individual development and wellbeing as well as community experience. They involve standard, familiar things but also enable the appearance of new initiatives that accept different cultures and their presence. They challenge the current commercial, staid market-oriented activities that are held in many municipalities. Entertainment and competitive sports are not the answer to the need for people-oriented culture.

An upshot of the current situation is that many people in creative fields are forced to be entrepreneurs. Self-employed people work in a wide variety of professions, such as purchasing and sales agents, physiotherapists, trainers, and artists. People in employment or who are self-employed are entitled to be paid for their work.

Municipalities should start to employ artists. They could take the model used by the state, which employs provincial artists.

Housing

Housing costs have gone out of control in large parts of the country. Because people cannot give up having a roof over their heads, they have to cut back on other expenses as their rents increase. At worst this means having to reduce spending on things like medication and food.

The CPF believes that the rent ceiling must be brought back to put an end to fleecing from people for their homes. Profits generated by private-sector rental housing should be defined as dividend distribution and a freeze on rent increases introduced for at least the next five years.

We need legislation that prevents housing that comes within the sphere of Arava (social housing) regulations from being subject to unreasonable rent hikes when apartments cease to be covered by the regulations of the Arava system. Also, the practice of failing to make renovations and using renovation debt as grounds for premature release from Arava regulations must be stopped. Housing produced for rent must be subject to regulation even after being released, and with some exceptions the use of rental housing and its sale as owner-occupied units must be prevented by binding legislation.

Municipalities working together must establish their own building companies so we can ensure that sufficient, varied and environmentally friendly housing gets built. Municipalities must plan the number of plots for building reasonably priced rental housing according to the need of their area. The location of plots planned for social housing must not be such as to increase inequality among housing areas and inhabitants. The government must use the State Housing Fund's millions of euros of annual revenue mainly for producing housing and financing municipal construction companies.

The state and municipalities must take policy decisions to make land rents, interest rates and property taxes fairer. The tax deductibility of interest on mortgages must be retained.

Municipalities must hold on to their planning rights, which must not be given over to steering real-estate speculation. Local residents must have real means to influence planning decisions. It is important to stop

residential areas from becoming segregated, safeguard local services, promote public transport-based solutions, and protect the natural and cultural environment.

Regional policy

There is an exceptionally strong wave of internal migration taking place in Finland from rural areas to the main urban centres, similar to that of the 1960s. This upsurge neither benefits the declining population nor the centres of growth themselves.

Successive governments have run down regional policy and replaced it with a one-sided metropolitan policy. The CPF calls for safeguarding the financial capacity of municipalities and province throughout the country. More jobs need to be created elsewhere than in the growth centres through active state and municipal intervention. Linked to this is the need to develop transport infrastructure, public transport and online services, which must not be subordinated to the right-wing ambitions of competitive tendering and privatization.

Red environmental protection, public transport and urban planning

Finland's natural environment and indeed the habitability of the whole planet is threatened by unfolding ecological catastrophe in which transnational corporations grind out profits at the expense of the environment, animals and human beings. A specific example of this is the environmental devastation and plight of the local population caused by mining in Talvivaara. Private mining operations are on the increase in Finland, despite cautionary examples.

Although the state of the country's water resources has partially improved, factory farming is placing a heavy burden on such environments as the Baltic Sea and the Finnish coastline. Ecologically unsustainable forestry policies have undermined biodiversity.

In terms of energy production, Finland must opt for self-sufficiency and stop using non-renewable energy sources, including peat. Energy consumption must also be addressed, for instance using taxation. Municipalities must not sell off environmentally important energy water and public transport for private ownership.

Municipalities must develop their own public transport services. In many municipalities the CPF has tabled proposals for making public transport a free service. Free public transport would strengthen the equal rights of residents to access services and employment.

Decisions must be taken on urban planning that reduce the use of private cars, such as by developing lanes for light traffic, pedestrian precincts, and smart traffic networks. Traffic can also be reduced by car sharing and by keeping services and workplaces close at hand.

The urban nature must be protected and cities must not be allowed to build too tightly. Small green areas and copses are important for residents and they must not be sold off for development at the expense of people's enjoyment.

Municipalities must favour local producers, such as by focussing their own catering procurements as much as possible on local producing. Vegetarian food should be favoured as a more ethical option than meat production, including in terms of energy and water consumption. Environmental education and self-sufficiency must be taught in municipalities.

All of these are ways to combat climate change.

Municipal finance and taxation

Municipal financing has long been cut on the decision of governments that have included all political parties represented in parliament. If it hadn't been for these cuts to state subsidies for local government, municipalities would not now face the financial problems they do. Concurrently, the duties and responsibilities of municipalities have increased.

In municipalities, capital income must begin with taxation, like any other income. This would generate about €1,5-billion a year for municipalities. Municipal state subsidies and the share of corporate tax revenue must be raised. Municipal taxation must be made progressive and the basic municipal tax deduction must be adjusted.

Municipal finances can and should be strengthened by developing municipal business activity. Municipalities must produce basic services themselves and get rid of expensive private services. The CPF calls for an end to cuts in state subsidies for municipalities.

Opposing fascism, racism and war at municipal level

The struggle among the major powers and giant corporations over natural resources, markets and influence are causing more wars, misery, and environmental devastation worldwide. In Finland, the right-wing government is altogether preparing arms procurements worth €10-billion at the same time that it claims that cuts to municipal services are imperative.

Although municipalities do not determine Finnish foreign policy, they can do much for the world. Municipalities can and they should bear global responsibility in their procurements and commit to the principles of fair trade. They can promote peace education, take a stand against racism, and develop town-twinning activities. Municipalities must assist refugees and undocumented people. Municipalities must invest in the integration of immigrants by redoubling resources for language and other education, and for employment.

Communists believe that each and every person in need must be helped. Solidarity with the oppressed requires standing by their side. Explicit, shameless and violent fascism and racism have gone so far that it is imperative to close them off from any decision-making processes. The CPF will in no way work with fascist and racist groups in local government.

Not for Sale!

The municipal franchise was the fruit of struggle by the labour movement and women's movement. Now the substance of this right, won a hundred years ago, is being narrowed down by cuts to municipal services and their transfer to corporate control.

The CPF seeks to build municipalities and their management on the basis of their residents' self rule and democracy. Our municipalities are not for sale – and neither are our candidates.

We call for democratic welfare-oriented municipalities. They are the real alternative to capitalist markets, which make people's fundamental rights subservient to the drive for private profit. We think that the welfare that must be generated at local level forms the basis for the future of society as a whole. As municipalities develop services and revenue producing non-profit business activity, they can act as pioneers for developing workplace democracy. Also, the struggles waged in municipalities generate a range of social networks and practices. By using them we can develop solutions rooted in environmental sustainability, social equality and international solidarity to urgent problems and pave the way to a new socialism of the 2000s