

Danish Social Democratic government: A major disappointment

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Support for the Social Democratic government has dropped continuously since its formation two years ago.

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Twenty-three thousand unemployed workers lost their benefits in the first half of 2013 due to new legislation adopted in 2010. This social disaster is the major single issue that has discredited the Danish Social Democratic government.

Parliamentary elections in 2011 paved the way for Helle Thorning-Schmidt as head of government, the first female prime minister ever in Denmark. After 10 years of right wing rule (most of the time led by Anders Fogh-Rasmussen, now general secretary of NATO, and with permanent support by the far right, anti-immigrant Danish Peoples Party), expectations of a new course, a left government, were high. However, expectations have turned into disappointment because policies continued along the very same lines as before.

The elections resulted in a coalition government of three parties; however, without parliamentary majority: Social Democracy, the left reformist Socialist Peoples' Party, and the Social Liberals (in Danish, for historical reasons, called "the Radical Left"). In fact, the election result was not a victory for these three parties compared to the previous 2007 elections but just a redistribution of their seats: While the Social Liberals gained 8 seats, for Social Democracy the result (24.8 percent) was the worst since 1903! Thus, only the 12 seats of the far left Red Green Alliance (up from 4 seats) ensured a majority for the formation of a new government.

Austerity measures

Quickly after the formation of the new government, many voters got disappointed with a "red government implementing blue policies". Already in the first program declaration, the new government stated that "point of departure for the government is the economic policies by the VK-government [i.e. the former, bourgeois government] in broad terms.... The government will implement reforms that increase the supply of labour supply in order to increase growth in Denmark ..."

To base itself on the economic policies of the former government meant among other things to

accept recent legislation that reduced the period of unemployment benefits from four to two years. To “increase the supply of labour” meant working more and reducing social benefits.

One of the first moves was an attempt to make a deal with the unions to increase the working week by one hour. For most workers, this made no sense at a time with rising unemployment, and negotiations broke down when the metal workers federation – known as a federation with a rather right wing leadership – dug their heels in and said no as a result of an organized protest among shop stewards.

Following this failure, a series of austerity measures has been implemented with the right wing opposition:-

- A tax reform involving a reduction of the top tax by raising the borderline for top tax and a postponement of the upward regulation of social benefits ;
- Reducing benefits for thousands of disabled people and reducing their access to the labor market, without any demands to the employers;
- Reducing the social benefits for people between 25-30 years old by 50 percent;
- A budget law punishing local governments with heavy fines if they pass certain limits for spending;
- Reduction of student benefits.

Thousands losing unemployment benefits

The single issue that caused most worry for the government is the big number of workers losing their right to unemployment benefits. In 2010, the Liberal government passed a law, supported by the Social Liberals, reducing the period of unemployment benefits from four to two years and increasing the working period for regaining the right to unemployment benefits from a half to one year. This happened at a time when unemployment was rising. As a result, from July 2012 thousands of unemployed workers faced a dramatic fall in income, many even losing the right to the smaller social benefit (because it is dependent on spouse income).

For the Red-Green Alliance, together with the unions, and with major media attention, it became the number one demand to the government to find a solution to this problem. To some degree, the campaign succeeded in forcing the government to do something, but on the other side all measures have been insufficient and temporary.

Teachers’ strike

Another major development was the lockout of all teachers in primary and lower secondary schools in April 2013. After one month, the government intervened and stopped the lockout with a law following the demands of the employers in most aspects. As a result, national regulation of the working time of the teachers was removed, i.e. the head of every school is now entitled to decide how many lessons the teachers must teach (in practice this means more lessons and less/worse preparation).

The counterpart of most teachers is not the state but the National Federation of Local Councils. However, the negotiation roadmap was agreed beforehand with the government as part of a planned

new law on primary schools including more lessons. The national teachers' federation, organizing more than 90 percent of all teachers, refused to abide and mobilized members in an impressive way but had no strategy to win the fight by seeking active support from other unions.

Most people were taken by surprise that the government let the lockout continue for a whole month and by the ultimate stance of the employers, refusing any real negotiations. Generally, the "Danish model" for labor regulation is praised highly as an ideal system - i.e. workers as well as employers organized in one sector federation, bargaining every two years and ending up with national agreements after real negotiations providing both parts with some improvements - and no major labor disputes after the agreement is accepted in a referendum by the members. However, the behavior of the government (and the National Federation of Local Councils) totally disregarded the "spirit" of this model by refusing any real negotiations at all.

The defeat of the teachers is a sign of future attacks on other workers in the public sector. This is part of a government plan of "modernizing" the public sector to get it more efficient by pushing the workforce to work harder. A recent "growth plan" upgraded the goal of financial saving in the public sector from 5 to 12 billion Danish kroner by 2020.

In line with this plan, goals for public sector growth have been reduced. While Social Democracy and Socialist Peoples' Party in a common plan before the elections set the average annual growth in public sector to 1.4 percent - opposed to 0.8 percent by the former government, the goal is now downgraded to 0.63 percent annually until 2020!

Declining support

A poll among teachers conducted during the lockout showed support for the three government parties dropping from 65 percent in the elections to only 5 percent (!) while 34 percent would vote for the Red Green Alliance.

This is a remarkable poll reflecting the mood among teachers during their labor struggle. However, the trend is general. Popular support for the three government parties has declined in opinion polls continuously since the elections while support for the Red Green Alliance has grown very much (up from 6.7 percent in 2011 to 12 percent in July 2013). However, the right wing parties are getting voters too and are already discussing how to form the next government after upcoming elections not later than September 2015. In particular the decline for the Social Democrats is remarkable (19 percent in July 2013), as well for the Socialist Peoples' Party (down from 9.2 in 2011 to 5 percent in July 2013).

Despite criticism and disappointment in the union movement, protests, mobilizations and organizing have been modest. Union leaders don't want to disturb the government (too much) and are not pushed from below to mobilize, while the presence among union members of radical left activists is not sufficient to represent a credible alternative for action.

Challenges facing the Red Green Alliance

For the Red Green Alliance, this situation presents a series of challenges. The fast growth of popular support gives the party a real public audience, media access etc. At the same time, increased membership (now more than 10.000, half of them signed up during the last two years) opens new possibilities for organizing, involvement in social movements and party building.

However, there is a political challenge concerning the relation to the government.

The Red Green Alliance supported the formation of the government but is opposed to most of its economic and labour market policies. Some improvements have been implemented: all “poverty benefits” (extraordinary small social benefits introduced for specific groups by the former government) are removed; conditions for asylum seekers are improved; restrictions for obtaining residence in Denmark eased; more spending for public transport; investment programs will be initiated ahead of schedule; a deal about renewable energy (concluded with all parties); more money to fight social dumping; and several “rescue measures” to help unemployed people losing their benefits.

As guiding line, the Red Green Alliance holds on to the principle of “supporting any improvement – even the minor ones, while opposing any reductions, even the minor ones”. However, the practical interpretation of this simple principle showed to be not so simple and caused much discussion in the party.

Most controversial and with most consequences is the vote on the state budget which has to be adopted in December every year. Without a parliamentary majority for the budget law, the government will be forced to resign and call new elections. While there was a general agreement in the party to support the first budget law in late 2011, the next year the leadership was divided with a minority recommending not voting for the budget law. According to SAP, the Danish section of the 4th International, it was a “major mistake” to vote for the budget law. [1]

The annual party conference in May 2013 showed a party with increasing political polarization without taking a specific position on the budget vote the year before. The conference adopted a resolution assessing the government and the role of the Red Green Alliance, including criteria for supporting the next budget law. [2]

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P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 27459), [Denmark - A SAP Congress resolution - Budget 2013: A major mistake by the Red-Green Alliance](#).

[2] See on ESSF (article 29560), [Denmark : The Red Green Alliance and the government](#) and the interview with Michael Voss, member of the RGA National Leadership (article 29561), [Denmark: A glimpse of the discussions within the Red-Green Alliance](#).