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Denmark

Denmark's Red-Greens: what answers when the climate crisis shakes up politics?

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV537 - October 2019 -

Publication date: Saturday 19 October 2019

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Former metal worker Søren Søndergaard, who presently represents the outer Copenhagen electorate of Gladsaxe in the Danish parliament, has a long history in radical left politics. In the 1980s, he was part of the daily leadership of the Socialist Workers Party, one of the three founding organisations of the Red-Green Alliance (RGA), known in Denmark as the Unity List – the Red-Greens.

Søndergaard was a member of the Danish Parliament from 1994 to 2005 and Gladsaxe Town Council from 2006 to 2007. He also served as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

In 2007, Søndergaard was elected as a Member of the European Parliament for the People's Movement against the European Union (EU). After resigning this position in 2014, he won election to the Danish parliament in 2015 as an RGA MP for Gladsaxe: he was re-elected in the June 5 general election this year.

Søndergaard spoke with Green Left Weekly European correspondent Dick Nichols after the RGA's 30th Annual Meeting, held in Copenhagen on October 5-6.

The June 5 Danish general election saw a victory for what in Denmark is called the “red bloc” – the Social Democrats, Socialist People's Party (SF), Social Liberals and RGA – over the “blue bloc” – the Liberals (Venstre), Danish People's Party (DF), Conservatives and Liberal Alliance, with 15 seats in the 179-seat parliament shifting from “blue” to “red”.

On June 25, the Social Democrats announced they would form government with the support of the other red bloc parties.

Given that the Social Democrats have adopted the xenophobic and discriminatory immigration policies of the previous Venstre administration, was this result really an advance for progressive politics?

The result can't be understood in terms of immigration and refugee policy alone, although the Social Democrats certainly continue with the essence of the DF's approach – the rhetoric is different but the content is practically the same. That's why DF was the biggest loser on June 5. With this change in position the Social Democrats did help displace immigration as the number one issue in Danish politics, although it's still that for a lot of people.

Yet that shift by the Social Democrats wouldn't alone have won the election for them – even less so for the red bloc as a whole. What counted most were people's mobilisations around the two biggest issues at this election: firstly the need to act urgently on the climate crisis and secondly the need to reform our system of day care for young children, one of the weakest points in our social welfare system.

These mobilisations put the right-wing parties on the defensive with the result that climate and child care became the lead points in the political agreement [“A Fair Direction for Denmark”] that the red bloc parties signed to allow the formation of a Social Democratic government [led by prime minister Mette Frederiksen]. [\[1\]](#)

How did climate get to be the number one issue in Danish politics?

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The climate movement exploded here about a year ago, with demonstrations of 50,000 in Copenhagen. Next came the longest dry spell in Denmark in memory and the unprecedented reduction in Arctic sea ice. This brought the message of climate change home to the whole population, and at that point climate emerged in opinion polling as people's number one concern.

The negotiations over forming government were the longest since 1988. Why?

Firstly, because the Social Democrats, who had campaigned in the election for a 50 per cent reduction in Danish greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 [compared to the 1990 baseline] had to accept the 70 per cent target that the other red bloc parties were proposing. Without the Social Democrats accepting the 70%, which they did before the final agreement was signed, they could not have formed government.

The other main point of resistance was immigration and refugee policy—the Social Democrats kept arguing that tight immigration controls were needed to keep the Danish welfare system sustainable. In the end they gave way on a number of secondary points—the uninhabited island of Lindholm won't now be used as a detention centre for asylum seekers and Denmark will again start accepting refugees under the United Nations quota system.

The final agreement reflected the June 5 election result: the Social Democrats' vote went down slightly even as they picked up an extra seat, while the SV and the RV, who were seen as committed to the 70% target and to restoring and improving the welfare system, picked up 15 seats between them.

Yet the RGA lost a seat, going from 14 to 13. Nonetheless, the mood at your congress was upbeat....

That's precisely because of the government understanding reached with the other red bloc parties—all RGA members see it as a big step forward. Denmark now has the most ambitious greenhouse gas reduction target in the world, and the agreement also commits the government to strengthening the welfare system and fighting inequality. Other goals are combatting the tendency to centralisation, increasing equality in education, advancing social integration and helping achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Regardless of whether we won or lost a seat or two, the RGA played a key role in achieving this result. Our Climate Plan 2030 showed, on the basis of statistics everyone accepts, that a 70% greenhouse gas reduction by 2030 is achievable, and helped to shift public opinion in its favour. It's why the Social Democrat environment spokesperson (now environment minister) Lea Wermelin had to stop calling the target "utopian" and why the Liberals themselves now support it. In fact only one Danish party is still holding out against the 70%.

But given the key role RGA members have been playing in the climate movement, the lack of recognition by the voters must have been a bit disappointing...

Of course, but let's keep the loss of a seat in perspective. Twenty years ago the RGA was one of Denmark's minor parties and at times struggled to meet the two percent threshold [for parliamentary representation]. Now it's consolidated as one of the medium-sized parties that come after the Liberals and the Social Democrats.

It's true that at these elections we were again overtaken by the Social Liberals and the SF after beating them in 2014, but this too has to be kept in perspective. In 2014, the SF paid dearly for participating in a Social Democratic government which locked out school teachers and sold off part of the state energy provider to Goldman Sachs. Many former SF voters then turned to us in protest against the performance of their party.

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However, memories fade, especially among the bulk of the population that doesn't follow politics obsessively. The SF at this election was seen most as the party supporting the parents who have been protesting against shortcomings in the system of day care and as the most practical tool for keeping the Social Democrats honest on social policy generally. Many who protested against the SF in 2014 returned to it this time around.

As a result the RGA has fallen from fourth to sixth party in the parliament and lost its position on the parliament's speakership panel, which organises its order of business. Also the media now tend to come to us only after getting the comments of the other red bloc parties. But these are minor irritations in a scenario that is strongly positive for the RGA.

The loss of votes to SF must have been offset by winning the support of former supporters of [green party] The Alternative?

Yes. The Alternative made the bad mistake of presenting themselves as a "green bloc" alternative to the red bloc: they would not in any circumstances support a Social Democratic government and their leader would be a third candidate for prime minister. Given that this meant votes for the Alternative could now help the return of the Liberals, many of its supporters in 2015 came across to the RGA at this poll, as The Alternative lost four of its nine seats.

How do you expect the Frederiksen government to move to implement "A Fair Direction for Denmark"?

This document is not the traditional list of legislative measures that a new Danish government announces for presentation to parliament, but rather a statement of goals and of broad measures for achieving them. That gives the government room to manoeuvre and drag its feet and the ability to plead insufficient finance or business sector resistance whenever it gets into trouble with implementation, especially with regard to climate.

At the same time, I would expect the government to move rapidly to implement the agreement's less difficult commitments, not the least because in this way the Social Democrats will get the credit for a program that is generating a lot of enthusiasm.

Of course, the action of the government will depend greatly on the strength of the movements whose mobilisations are reflected in the government agreement. RGA members will definitely be working to make sure that the climate and other movements don't ease up now that the Liberals are out of government.

How will the RGA respond to those aspects of the government's policy with which it disagrees?

We have made it clear to the government that they cannot expect our vote for any measure that worsens the situation of working people and people on welfare, or of the environment. Our commitment is to the agreement and not to necessarily supporting the government on the many issues the agreement doesn't cover.

Most importantly, if RGA judges that a conflict has arisen with the government that puts the objectives of the agreement at serious risk we shall not hesitate to call for the matter to be put to the vote of the people. Let the people decide if a basic breach of the agreement has taken place.

How does this stance relate to the RGA's perspective, stressed at its 2018 annual meeting, of working to create a third, radical, pole in Danish politics as an alternative to the seemingly permanent non-choice between the Social Democrats and Liberals?

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Our medium-term objective is still to help consolidate a radical pole around the SF, RGA and The Alternative, but it's obviously not on the agenda at the present point in the political cycle.

For the perspective to have some chance of realisation it would need a shift by the SF away from its standard approach of keeping the Social Democrats honest. That's not going to happen: given that this orientation has just now had some success in the form of the agreement for government, it would be naive to view a third pole as a short term prospect. It will require a crisis of the Social Democracy itself to put it back on the agenda as an immediate goal.

Each year the RGA Annual Meeting adopts a detailed position on some key aspect of contemporary politics. In 2021 it will reconsider its position on the European Union, which to date has been to support Denmark's withdrawal via referendum. Also, in the May 26 elections to the European Parliament the RGA stood in its own name for the first time, in addition to continuing to support the candidate of the People's Movement against the EU. Amid claims that the RGA is softening its anti-EU stance, RGA candidate Nikolaj Villumsen won a seat while the People's Movement candidate Rina Ronja Kari did not. What's happening with the RGA orientation to the EU?

Two trends are pressing the RGA to reconsider its orientation towards EU: the first is the spectacle of Brexit, the second the need for supranational action around climate.

Brexit has had a traumatic impact here, because it has dramatised the fact that exit from the EU has unpredictable, potentially very bad, consequences, especially if done without agreement. The once common attitude that Denmark would be better off "if we just left" has suffered a lot. Before Brexit, opinion polling gave around 40% support for a Danish referendum on leaving the EU, and the RGA supported it: the latest poll has support for such a referendum at only 19%.

At the same time, many comrades involved in the climate movement, aware that the sort of measures we put forward in our climate plan have to be adopted on a European scale, stress the need to intervene in the EU institutions to get serious continent-wide action.

Well and good. But has the nature of the EU changed? It's still the same neoliberal monster that the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties created, and it still operates to impose discipline on member states in the interest of big, especially German and French, capital.

We've just had a telling example of that here in Denmark. The transport part of the government's climate plan foresees a ban on diesel- and petrol-driven driven. Message from Brussels to our environment minister: that is illegal under EU regulations because such measures have to be taken EU-wide. The result, of course, of pressure by the German and French motor industries.

So, I don't think our basic analysis of the EU should change because the EU hasn't changed. However, we should accompany all efforts to force the EU to adopt progressive measures and go through the learning experience with those proposing them. And the RGA needs to clarify for itself how a democratic alternative to the EU can actually "really" get constructed on the basis of the struggles against it. So let's have the discussion.

What is the most important challenge the RGA has faced recently?

The RGA has had to modernise, but without losing its radical character...

Modernise?

Yes, a survey was done about what people thought of the RGA, and we got a lot of interesting answers. For example, the RGA was only for people who are not normal, only for minorities, not for ordinary people, they like violence...all that stuff.

We worked hard to get rid of some of these impressions, and that means when you've written 38 times in your program that you want a revolution, out with all thatâ€”now you have it in once.

This could give the wrong impression that when we're talking about modernisation we don't want a radical change, that behind that word "modernisation" we're introducing a right-wing shift. But what we said very clearly is that we wanted a modernisation without going to the right.

Yes, of course, there is a danger that some rightward tendencies will look to clothe themselves in the rhetoric of modernisation, for example in relation to the EU. Of course we should talk so ordinary people can understand and of course we should have a tactic that can help people to learn, but at the same time, how much should we change or hide our fundamental opinions? That issue is still unsettled in the RGA.

And the biggest challenge now?

The biggest challenge facing us is to maintain the big mobilisations around climate and social issues so as to make sure that the common governmental platform agreed with the other parties gets implemented. Or, if that battle's lost, to make sure a broad alternative to the left of the Social Democracy gets built. That is the decisive test in front of us.

October 14

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[1] <https://www.socialdemokratiet.dk/media/8602/a-fair-direction-for-denmark.pdf>.