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Denmark

A new period for the Red Green Alliance

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The national elections in Denmark on 15 September marked the end of ten years of the Liberal-Conservative government based on support from the xenophobic populist right Danish Peoples Party (DPP-Dansk Folkeparti). It will be replaced by a centre-left government of the Socialist Peoples Party (SPP-Socialistisk Folkepart), Social Democrats (SD-Socialdemokraterne) and the Social Liberal Party (SLP-Radikale Venstre) supported by the Red Green Alliance (RGA-Enhedslisten). The big winners of the election were the SLP and the RGA, the latter with a tripling of their support. The main losers were the Conservatives (Det Konservative Folkeparti) and Socialist Peoples Party.

Ten years of right government

When the Liberal-Conservative government won a majority with the DPP it was a break with decades of governments based on participation or support from centre parties like the SLP. Though the DPP maintains a profile as the defender of workers and pensioners it has been willing to lend votes to government attacks as long as they were paid off with attacks on immigrants.

During the Liberal-Conservative government, mobilisations in defence of workers' rights, against social cuts and the Iraqi war have been closely linked to the perspective of another government.

The attacks on early retirement

One of the central questions in the Danish political debate during the last 15 years has been the right to early retirement at the age of 60. During the centre-left government in the 90's the prime minister guaranteed that early retirement was there to stay. When the centre-left government changed the early retirement in 1999 from a general right to an insurance system linked to the unemployment system it lost a lot of trust from the working class and thus paved the way for the right. The Social Democrats and Social Liberals also took part in a political agreement to gradually raise the age where people would be entitled to early retirement and pensions by five years. In his new year speech on 1 January 2011 the prime minister came with a proposal to abolish the early retirement entirely. This initiated campaigns by the trade unions in defence of the early retirement scheme and in opinion polls it was close to a left majority without the Social Liberals. The Conservative-Liberal government managed to get an agreement with the Social Liberals and the Danish Peoples Party to advance the cuts on the early retirement.

The Centre-left “alternative”

The central topic in the political debates up to and during the electoral campaigns was how to balance the state budget in 2020. According to some economic forecasts there will be a deficit of 47 billion kroner in 2020 on the public finances and there will be a shortage of labour. The Social Democrats and Socialist Peoples Party basically accept the same economic and demographic assumptions as the right. Their alternative economic plan called “fair solution” is based on increasing working time by 12 minutes per day through agreements with the trade unions and employers' organisations. They claim that this is a necessary measure to keep early retirement and avoid cuts in public welfare. To meet criticism that this is ridiculous while there are 200,000 unemployed they have made the concession that it should not happen before there is full employment. Also the economic plan of the right is based on the assumption

that in the long run there will be full employment.

A centre or left government

The trade unions and most of the electoral base of SD and SPP have put hopes in a new left government that would defend the interest of the working class. Nevertheless the leaders of SD and SPP have been more ambiguous, while some have mentioned the importance of reinstating the cooperative parliament that makes agreements across the centre excluding the extreme parties, meaning the RGA and DPP. This was also a clear invitation to the Social Liberals and since the elections the SD-SPP alliance has made an agreement with the Social Liberal Party to form a common government. The government platform includes the agreed attacks on early retirement. There is a majority for the parties which made the agreement. If the SD-SPP had kept the Social Liberals outside the government they could have avoided taking responsibility for the attack. In the Danish political system a government has to follow decisions by a majority of the parliament but can be in minority without having to resign.

The rise and fall of the SPP

This is the first time ever that the Socialist Peoples Party has been in government. It has been a goal of the party for many years and led to making many concessions in order to prove it is a responsible party. One of the first was the acceptance of the Maastricht treaty in 1993. During the last five years it has gone through a dramatic transformation to become more a peoples' party and less a socialist party. This included a very populist attitude towards immigrants. They gave up the defence for immigrants and asylum seekers rights. The chairman condemned reactionary Muslim groups in a way that it could be understood as being generally against all Muslims. The new populist profile of the party seemed to a great success. From the 2005 to 2007 elections they rose from 6 to 13 %. Later polls gave the party around 20 % though closing in on the Social Democrats to be the main left party. During the last years the Social Democrats and Socialist Peoples Party has formed a very close political alliance. Not only have they developed common political proposals but they have made common advertisements on bill-boards etc.

In autumn 2010 the Liberal-Conservative government presented a plan to put extra criteria for family union with immigrants. This could mean that it would be much more difficult to get a stay-permit for a spouse from a non-European country. The SD and SPP took some time as they considered whether to support this proposal. Finally they decided to present an alternative that still included more strict criteria than the existing though more moderate than the right had proposed. This seemed to be the straw that broke the camels back and they started to lose support.

The recent success of the RGA

The RGA first passed the 2% threshold needed for parliamentary representation in 1994, after the SPP accepted the Maastricht treaty. Since then the RGA reached a low point in the elections 2007. On the one hand the RGA was in a difficult situation with internal disagreement and external attacks for choosing a Muslim woman wearing a hijab as a candidate, and on the other the SPP was profiting from a general "cool factor" making it a very popular party in particular among youth. The discontent with the populism of the SPP is the main reason for the possibilities for the RGA. But it is also the general adaptation to the liberal economic policies by the SD-SPP alliance. According to opinion polls the rise in its support began in autumn 2010. Many new members have also joined. When the elections were announced on 26 August support was about 4.5%. During the three weeks of electoral campaign SD-SPP continued to lose support as they did not represent a clear alternative to the right and thus made it possible to

undermine their credibility. It was thus only with a small margin that the four parties for a new government got a majority of 50,2% of the vote against the right.

The RGA campaign

The electoral campaign of the RGA beat everything it has done before. There were more militants taking part in the distribution of materials and posterizing than ever before. Around 1.5 million leaflets and pamphlets were distributed. Furthermore the RGA reached a new audience, breaking through the barrier of being a “strange” party and being taken seriously by a broader part of the population. The RGA became the “cool” party among youth with the charismatic spokesperson Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen in front. The campaign had the slogan: “There is room for welfare”. It was to break with dominating economic agenda and pointed to the taxation of rich, multinationals, speculators and the oil resources. The RGA presented a plan to create 100,000 jobs in public services and to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Defence of asylum-seekers and immigrants as well as unemployed were other central issues.

RGA and the new government

To fight to overthrow the right government and make the populist right lose their dictatorship over immigration policies has been a goal for the RGA ever since the government won the majority with the DPP 10 years ago. RGA gives its unconditional support to the new government. The RGA supports the formation of the government but makes no promises to support the proposals from the government. Decisions will be taken on an issue by issue basis and the RGA will not accept packages that link attacks on some with improvements for others. This will not prevent the RGA being put under pressure from the centre-left government. The government will try to give the RGA the responsibility for forcing the government to make deals with right. The ultimate pressure will be on the approval of the budget because the government will have to resign if it is not able to pass a budget. In its nature the budget is a package that includes all sorts of things including a budget for the military. During the SD-led government 1992-2001 the RGA never voted in favour of the budget though abstained on one occasion.

In order to prepare for this situation the RGA have had several debates on how to deal with the situation under a new government. At the 2010 RGA congress it was concluded that:

“The RGA encourages a new government to make a break that replaces the policies from the previous government with policy that is based on social equality, solidarity and sustainability. A budget that marks such a break will also have our votes. But we will under no circumstances vote in favour of a budget that:

- includes attacks;
- doesn’t include significant improvements;
- is the summary of one year of austerity, done with the parties from the right.”

This formulation was proposed by two SAP members in order to sharpen the original proposal from the leadership of the RGA.

A new period for the Red Green Alliance

The RGA will put forward demands on the government and work within the movement to build support for the demands to put the strongest possible pressure on the government. The RGA executive committee has made a call to branches, commissions and candidates of the RGA to organise public meetings with invitations to trade unions to debate expectations and demands on the new government.