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Danish RGA changes perspective

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The RGA defines its task as building a new Left in opposition to Social Democracy and to the right wing. The focus will no longer be appeals to or demands towards Social Democracy, but rather building our own political and organisational alternative and taking on responsibility for building social movements.

For the socialist left in Denmark the relationship to Social Democracy has always been the crux of political tactics. This focus has taken different forms. Some parts of the left worked for an alliance with the social democratic leadership. Other parts of the left expected some improvements from a social democratic government, compared to governments of the traditional right wing parties. Then again others made it a priority to reveal the class treason of the social democrats.

The Fourth International organisation in Denmark tried to implement a united front approach, based on the understanding and definition of Social Democracy as a reformist workers party or a bourgeois workers party.

All these variants of a socialist left approach to the historic big party of the labour movement have been present in Enhedslisten/Red Green Alliance.

Young illusions

In addition to the traditional currents of the socialist left, also known in the rest of Europe, a special current developed in the Red Green Alliance during the 10 years of right-wing government from 2001 to 2011. A layer of young activists came out of the autonomous movement, the different student organisations, the anti-racism movement, the pro-refugee movement, the anti-cuts protests and other anti-government manifestations.

They experienced alliances with social democratic youth leaders, social democratic union leaders and on a few occasions support from social democratic MPs in opposing the right-wing government of that period. They were of a generation that did not study the history of the labour movement and experiences, strategies and tactics of the revolutionary movement very much. Out of this came a romantic view of previous Social Democratic governments and some illusions in what a new Social Democratic government would do or could be convinced to do.

This generation of RGA-members had an important position in the party in the period preceding the 2011 elections: in the National Leadership, in the – at that time – small parliamentary group, among the party staff in Parliament and in the group of candidates for the 2011 elections.

Hope for change

The focus on Social Democracy and on the importance of a change of government was not without foundation. Though based on an overall neoliberal approach to economic analysis, financial politics, social welfare politics and labour market politics, Social Democracy did actually propose some pro-worker and pro-welfare reforms in their election campaign of 2011.

Illusions in the outcome of a change of government were shared by an important part of the Social Democratic electorate. For the first time in many years union activists campaigned actively for a new government.

This situation inside and outside our party defined the RGA election campaign. The RGA challenged Social Democracy to carry out the best of their own election promises and to use a governmental change to make a real political change. In my view that was a necessary tactic, but already during the election campaign it was obvious that the young generation of the leadership did not only see it as a tactic, but really expected a government that would cooperate with the Red Green Alliance in implementing some progressive reforms – or at least put a halt to neoliberal austerity.

Disappointment

To the voters of Social Democracy, of Socialist People's Party and to a big extent of the Red Green Alliance the hard core neoliberal political practice of the new government came as a huge disappointment (See previous articles, most recently ["A defeat for austerity policies but no left wing victory"](#), June 2015).

This was equally true for the generation of young RGA MPs and party employees. For example, when the government broke off negotiations with the RGA on a tax reform and instead made a parliamentary deal with the traditional right wing parties, the very popular public spokesperson of the RGA, Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen, went on national TV in a fit of anger and said that the government "is pissing on their voters" and that from now on no deals on financial politics would be made with the RGA without an exact financial compensation for the negative effects of the tax reform and of other deals with the right wing.

Nevertheless the MP-group - with the support of the majority of the National Leadership - continued the rhetorical narrative of calling "our friends in Social Democracy" to order. They fixed most of their political proposals within the confines of "restoring the welfare society that we have built for decades". And they agreed to support the national budget of the government once more.

Cracks in this approach did appear, though, from the MP-group itself and coming out of the debates in the party. When elections were called in June 2015, it was obvious that running a campaign on the idea of positive change if the Social Democratic prime minister were re-elected would not be possible. Consequently, the RGA election campaign focused very much on RGA-politics, less on the issue of government. Still, very reasonably, the aim of avoiding the right-wing candidate for prime minister was an important part of the RGA campaign, but this was said in the framework of "things getting even worse" and "minimising the chances of RGA-influence".

No common project

When the RGA met in September for its first annual convention after the elections, a much stronger underlying change in attitude towards Social Democracy surfaced. The outgoing National Leadership – almost unanimously – proposed a brief text called "The Left of the Future – tasks for the RGA".

The text said:

"The story about the Helle Thorning-Schmidt government, the election campaign of Social Democracy plus the

post-election statements of the new leader of Social Democracy (HTS resigned just after the elections, and Mette Frederiksen took over - MV) have made it clear that the RGA has no project in common with Social Democracy. On the contrary the economic policy and the migrant/refugee policy of Social Democracy are much closer to the right wing than to us.”

The text then stated the need to rebuilt the Left and said:

“In this task we cannot rely on Social Democracy as a co-player. The Left must strengthen itself and develop by itself in opposition to both the right wing and to Social Democracy. Our main task cannot be attempts to make small correction to the defeated and mistaken political perspective of Social Democracy. We are the Left in our own right with our own perspective and our own course.”

The text took notice of the fact that the RGA now is the biggest party to the left of Social Democracy and concluded that it is the duty of the RGA to lead the work of rebuilding the Left.

This overall perspective was divided into seven roughly sketched tasks. Among these was the need for the RGA to take responsibility for building protests, mobilisation and organisations – not just supporting initiatives of others or demanding that other “leaderships” take action.

The text concluded in a call to other groups and individuals to join in the debate about a new Left in Denmark.

No blueprint – no guarantees

With only one vote against and a small number of abstentions the text was accepted by the convention.

Of course this does not change the RGA overnight – for many reasons. The text itself is not a blueprint for a new party project, but it indicates a new direction and some of the steps necessary to move that way.

RGA members and groups of members have made this overall conclusion on the basis of different analyses and experiences. Some have tried to move the party in that direction before. Some base the new approach on an analysis of the long-term development of Social Democracy. Others support the new perspective as an immediate reaction to their disappointment with the SD-led government.

A sober evaluation must include the fact that it is not relevant right now to appeal to Social Democracy or even make alliances with the party – whatever your political perspective is. A traditional right wing majority in Parliament supports the present government, and Social Democracy is only one of several opposition parties with no power at all. When we get closer to the next elections, and the issue of a new government is posed once more, old habits can easily surface again.

Membership democracy defended

Among other issues at the convention was a new plan for building the party. Part of this were several proposals that diminished membership influence, for example National Leadership election every two years instead of every year

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and choosing parliamentary candidates every two years instead every year. Another proposal weakened minority rights when choosing National Leadership.

These proposals were backed by the majority of the outgoing National Leadership, but they were all clearly defeated at the convention.