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Denmark

The Danish Red-Green Alliance turns 25; celebration and challenges

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The recent annual congress of the Danish Red-Green Alliance (RGA) from May 16 to May 18 showed a party in an optimistic mood. There were plenty reasons to celebrate; the party adopted a new platform and in 2014, on its 25th birthday, the party is larger and more popular than ever. But this growth and the political developments in Denmark also pose new challenges.

Over 300 delegates plus various guests participated in the three-day congress. In her opening speech, spokesperson Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen emphasized the growth of the party; the RGA - or Enhedslisten (Unity List) as it's known in Denmark - now has almost 10.000 members, twice as many as five years ago. In 2011, it won 12 seats in the parliament (out of 179). Some polls now give it 10 per cent. As Schmidt-Nielsen said, clearly the years in which the RGA election results were discussed in the same breath as the 2 per cent election threshold are now in the past. At the same time, she insisted the party is not moving closer to the center of Danish politics, a center that has moved dramatically to the right in recent years.

The RGA was founded in 1989 as an alliance of several smaller left wing parties, including the communist party and the Danish section of the Fourth International. Its recent rapid growth is partly thanks to the moving rightward of Socialistisk Folkeparti (SF, Socialist People's Party) that used to occupy a space between the Social-Democrats (SD) and the radical left RGA.

The 2011 elections resulted in the formation of a government coalition of social-democrats with SF and a social-liberal party, Radikale Venstre (RV). The RGA tripled its election results. After ten years of right-wing governments, many hoped the new coalition would bring change. The RGA took a position of critical support to the coalition government. It gave support to the formation of the government and tried to pressure it to fulfil the promises and expectations. The RGA has been open to negotiations in order to be part of agreements with the government whenever these would only include progressive measures. This led to some agreements, including the budgets in 2011 and 2012. The 2011 budget included progressive measures like the improvement of unemployment benefits, higher taxes for multinationals operating in Denmark and more money to protect the environment.

But the coalition has proven a disappointment and has mostly made agreements with the Conservative and Liberal parties from the former government. The RV, although the smallest party in the coalition, exerted a strong influence on its policies. Especially SF, which claims to be green and red, made a sharp turn to the right once in government and became more and more undistinguishable from the social-democrats. Contradicting election promises, Thor Möger Pedersen, SF minister of finances, came out against an increase of unemployment benefits and for lowering the top tax rate. The final straw was the government's plan to sell 19 percent of the state-owned energy company DONG to US investment bank Goldman Sachs. SF, already facing a strong decline in the polls, was unable to reach unity on this proposal. The social-democrats declared they would exclude the party from the government if any of its parliamentarians voted against or blank regarding the proposal. The result was that SF, marked by bitter internal fights, left the coalition and its six ministerial positions - but it still supported the sale. Four SF MPs (out of 16) left the party in the aftermath of the DONG discussions: three to the social-democrats and one to RV. Their sole MEP, their vice-president and Thor Möger Pedersen also left to the social-democrats.

The growth of the RGA is partly because it managed to attract disappointed SF supporters, both as voters and as members. But the sudden growth also brings new challenges. For example, how to integrate all these new people in the party? Adopting a new party platform (princippogram) was part of this. A new platform wasn't needed because the old one had become outdated – several speakers at the congress commented the politics remained the same. But there was a need for a new document, concise and clear, that a new generation could relate to. In her speech,

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Schmidt-Nielsen remarked that after the congress, the major newspapers and the political opponents of the party would have to accept their disappointment that the RGA remains anti-capitalist. The process of discussing and finally adapting the new platform was also a good way to familiarize new supporters with the RGA's principles. Anyway, of the old document, only 5000 copies had been printed.

But this hasn't solved all the problems of integrating new members or taking away all worries about the evolution of the RGA. Several speakers for example remarked that only a minority of the members had voted to elect delegates for the congress. For a long time, the RGA was mainly based in the Danish capital of Copenhagen, and still a disproportionately large share of its members live there. The RGA has now become a nation-wide party but especially in the countryside there is a need to develop the party's organization. The congress adopted proposals to invest more means in strengthening the party organization outside the major cities.

The recent growth creates other challenges as well. It was remarked throughout the congress that the RGA is now the only socialist party in the Danish parliament and naturally it attracts people that are disappointed in SF. But does this mean the RGA needs to become a rallying point for everybody who rejects neoliberalism, like those nostalgic for the 'old' SF, or should it try to pull such people further to the left, to its own anti-capitalist positions? A majority seemed convinced the party is strong enough to do the latter and the RGA remains a socialist party.

The RGA now has tasks that go beyond its own ranks. SF still supports the government while the trade-union leaderships remain linked to a declining social-democracy. This gives the RGA a heavy responsibility to organize opposition to such neoliberal policies as selling public goods to private banks. There's dissatisfaction with the governments' policies; SD and SF are down in the polls, and an online petition against the Goldman Sachs deal reached over 190,000 signatures. But the party wasn't able to build a sustained movements around it, nor could it do so during a four week lock-out of teachers a year ago that resulted in a deal that puts more pressure on teachers. Party-members expressed frustration that the potential to build social movements or rebuild a combative trade-union movement has not been fully exploited. The still relatively weak structure of the party is certainly part of the explanation for this weakness but there were also criticisms the RGA has focused too much on elections.

Although it was repeatedly emphasized in the discussion during the congress that the new platform is essentially the same as the old one, other party-members expressed fears that the party is being pulled to the right and that the new platform is focused too much on parliamentary work. After making such big jumps in terms of representatives in parliament and city councils, the RGA runs the risk of putting too much weight on the electoral side of politics. The crisis of SF leaves a big political vacuum between the radical left and social-democracy and this vacuum exerts a rightward pull on the RGA. 'We don't want to become another SF', as one speaker put it. Others expressed disappointment that proposed amendments to the draft that would have emphasized the importance of feminism in the party did not receive a majority.

In a statement after the congress, the Danish section of the Fourth International assessed the new platform as a solid, anti-capitalist manifesto, with a clear orientation towards class struggle and fundamental social changes. They evaluated the new platform as a step forward, since the RGA now has a platform that has clear majority support that can be used to further build the RGA as an anti-capitalist party. Many discussions, on socialist strategy, the role of the state and relationship between parliament' and social movements in the fight for socialism, are sure to continue.

The new platform of the RGA that was adopted is an essential political compass for the party as it grapples with these challenges. It's a compass that points towards socialism, not just as a an abstract utopia but as a concrete task that has implications for the here and now. Many of the problems the RGA is having are those of a small, radical party that has made a national breakthrough and tries to balance its new tasks with preserving its principles. It's the kind of problems many leftists would be happy to have.