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Denmark

New government supported by far right

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THE big winner in the Danish national and local elections on November 20, 2001 was the Liberal Party, led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen. For the first time since 1924, Social Democracy is not the biggest political force.

In Aarhus, the second city, as well as several other cities across the country, government shifted to the Liberals. At national level, the Liberals established a government with the Conservatives, supported by the second biggest winner, the populist and anti-immigration Peoples' Party which succeeded in putting the "problem" of immigration and criminal immigrants on the agenda of all major parties.

Thus, political life is going to polarize significantly and break a tradition of governing with the support of small Centre parties. The upcoming government will be pure right. Times will be harder for the unemployed, poor people and - particularly - refugees and immigrants.

Environmental protection will be sacrificed in favour of corporate profits. Danish donations to international aid programs will be reduced. Profiting from a general economic upturn, unemployment has been reduced significantly during nine years of Social Democratic rule. Consequently, very important restrictions of the right to unemployment benefits have been passed in Parliament without serious mass-scale implications. With a new recession, this will change and make it impossible for the government to fulfil its welfare promises. The four key Liberal election promises were: 1) stricter sentences, particularly for rape and serious violence, 2) no tax increases, 3) more restrictions in immigration legislation and 4) an improved health system.

The election outcome was no surprise since all opinion polls since the end of 1998 pointed to a historical setback for Social Democracy. At that time the party - together with the bourgeois opposition - reduced the right to retirement pension at the age of 60. Early retirement now requires private saving over a period of 25 years, i.e. beginning at the age of 35. Sanctioned by the voters, Social Democracy dropped from 36% in the March 1998 elections to below 20% and has only slowly recovered since then, standing at 29% in the recent elections.

The victory of the right parties is not necessarily a turn to the right by the voters. During the election campaign, the Liberals as well as the Peoples' Party pretended to be the best defenders of the welfare system, particularly concerning the health sector and care for the elderly. The miserable situation in Social Democratic-controlled Copenhagen, where there have been some outstanding scandals, was exploited to the maximum. The bourgeois parties denied any intentions of cutting the welfare system but stressed the importance of "free choice", "personal freedom" and "human care".

For many voters, elections were a choice between the old - worn-out - Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen and the new Anders Fogh Rasmussen. The "presidential race" between the two Rasmussens, the Liberal and the Social Democratic candidates, partly explains why the radical left in the Red Green Alliance went down from 5 to 4 seats (2.4% of the national vote). In Copenhagen, the stronghold of the Alliance, it went from 9.6% to 8.1% and lost two seats in the City council. It will, however, keep one of the seven City Mayors.

Two MPs were re-elected: Soeren Soendergaard, who is a member of the SAP, the Danish section of the Fourth International, and Keld Albrechtsen, spokesperson on European Union matters. The two new MPs are both women. Pernille Rosenkrantz-Theil is a 24-year-old student. Line Barfod is 37 years old and a lawyer. Two members of the SAP were elected to local councils.

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The Alliance will now have to adjust its political orientation. It entered Parliament in 1994, five years after its formation. In some specific cases - including education, transport and environment - the Alliance was in a position to make parliamentary deals and had a real influence.

Now, the Red Green Alliance will be in a clear opposition. It will be marginalized in the parliamentary game and the public media. The priority will shift to campaigns on single issues and the Alliance's parliamentary strength will, more than ever, be used to give support and inspiration to extra parliamentary movements and actions.