

EU AND THE LEFT IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Country report: Denmark

The Danish left and the Maastricht Treaty

The broad left in Denmark – i.e. including the Social Democrats – has always been divided on the issue of their position on EEC or EU membership. The Social Democrats have been favourable to membership from the start (Denmark entered the EEC in 1973), whereas the left parties to the left of the Social Democrats opposed membership in the referendum in 1972. Opposition to the EEC was originally mainly a leftwing tendency, based on the analysis that EEC membership would undermine democracy and boost the interests of Big Capital.

The only time the Social Democrats were opposed to further EEC integration was with regard to the issue of the introduction of the Single Market. Very interesting as this showed opposition to a crucial step of market liberalization. There were internal divisions concerning the issue among the Social Democrats, but the opposition to the Single Market also seemed to be due to tactical concerns as at the time the right wing of the Danish Parliament were in power. The Social Democrats may very well have seen a chance to undermine the government, as a referendum took place in 1986 concerning the issue.

When there was a Yes vote in this referendum the Social Democrats changed their position and a few years later fully embraced the Maastricht Treaty and the EMU – the Economic and Monetary Union.

After the Danish NO to the Maastricht Treaty in the referendum in 1992 there was a change in the position of the Socialist People's Party (SF - Socialistisk Folkeparti). SF accepted a compromise – the Edinburgh Agreement – which subsequently was approved in a new referendum in 1993. This agreement introduced 4 opt-outs for Denmark – with regard to the Euro, defence, supranational cooperation on justice and home affairs, and citizenship. This meant that the Danish Government adapted to the terms of the Euro – but did not enter the final third stage - the Euro itself. A new referendum in 2000 on Euro membership was supposed to solve this “problem” for the government, but there was an overwhelming No vote in this referendum. Subsequently the government decided to tie the Danish “Krone” to the Euro without being a member of the euro zone.

The change of position of SF with regard to the Maastricht Treaty in 1992/93 led to a serious downturn for the party, which had peaked in popular support from the end of the 1980s. It also meant that a new radical left formation, Enhedslisten – De Rød-Grønne – the Red-Green Alliance – entered the parliament with 6 seats in the elections in 1994. The Red-Green Alliance was one of the foremost Danish opponents of the Maastricht Treaty and the Edinburgh

Agreement.

SF still had some reservations with regard to the EU – for example the party opposed Euro membership in the referendum in 2000.

The main reasons for the left parties to oppose the Maastricht Treaty and the Euro was the institutionalization of neoliberalism and monetarism as part of the foundation of the EU. There was also a belief also that this would lead to a destruction of the Nordic welfare state and the Scandinavian model.

The Social Democrats accepted neoliberalism, which was clear from the policies pursued by the Social Democratic-led governments in the 1990s. During this period there were cuts in the public sector and privatizations in an attempt to adapt to the so-called Maastricht criteria. This explains partly the defeat of the Social Democrats in the parliamentary elections of 2001 – many voters could no longer see any clear differences between the economic and labour market policies of the Social Democrats and those offered by the rightwing parties, which were the winners of these elections.

The Euro-zone crisis

The Euro zone crisis seems especially to have affected the policies (and strategy?) of the Social Democrats and SF - to some degree this may also be due to the access to power in the parliamentary elections in 2011 of both parties together with the Liberal Democrats (“Det Radikale Venstre”) – a neoliberal centre party. Being in government both the Social Democrats and SF have chosen uncritically to back the Angela Merkel line with regard to EU austerity policies and the EU fiscal pact, although Denmark is not a euro zone country – and despite the fact that the economic crisis is not so deep in this country as in many other EU countries. This means that the government is pursuing a clear-cut neoliberal line on economic and labour market policies hard to distinguish from that of the former rightwing government.

The adaptation of the Social Democrats and SF to rightwing austerity policies is actually breaking with their election promises before the elections in 2011. The Social Democrats and the Liberal Democrats were always pro-EU parties (both with some internal disagreement on this). But it is new to experience SF as uncritically supporting these policies (also with internal disagreement).

This has left Enhedslisten/the Red-Green Alliance as the only party – together with a number of very small CPs – to pursue policies in defense of the welfare state and opposed to neo-liberalism – as well as to EU integration. Red-Green Alliance EU policies have not changed. In many ways it seems that the EU critical analysis and policies of the Red-Green Alliance have been confirmed by developments within the EU as well as in Denmark, where we have seen a gradual undermining of the welfare state.

The swing of the Social Democrats and SF to austerity policies – as well as to anti-social welfare and labour market policies said to boost Danish competitiveness - has led to a disastrous setback

for both parties in popular support. Voters have fled to the right – and to the left (i.e. the Red-Green Alliance) according to the opinion polls. See below.

However, apart from this reaction there is no real popular mobilization. Large sections of the Danish population would oppose attacks on the welfare state – but they don't yet link these attacks to EU dictated policies – they see the Danish government as responsible for this.

There has been very little public interest in the EU fiscal pact, which was pushed through the Danish parliament at the end of May without much public attention. Danish working class people would very probably need to see more concrete effects of EU policies such as for example further deterioration of public welfare due to the restrictions of the EU fiscal pact before they start to link the two.

On the other hand there is a huge public awareness with regard to the Euro zone crisis as such, which has led to a marked increase in popular opposition to Danish membership of the Euro.

A new referendum on Euro membership, which the previous government announced as one of its future perspectives together with referendums on the other Danish opt-outs – have now been called off altogether by the centre-left government during the present government period. These referendums were anticipated by this and the former government to make Denmark ready to participate fully in the EU, so to call them off is a back-down on this by the government, which fears that it will lose such a referendum and maybe topple the government.

Other EU countries

Growing opposition to the Euro has not changed popular sentiment to other EU countries or any other countries. With regard to xenophobia, it seems to have receded compared to previously.

But it should be noted that the media has been trying to whip up hostility and disrespect towards the Greek people. For this reason you do find some of the same perceptions of Greeks as “lazy and cheating” – as can be seen in some other EU countries as well – for example in Germany.

As a radical left party the Red-Green Alliance has tried to combat such sentiment and to explain the causes of the Greek crisis. The government parties have not contributed to this. On the contrary they are explaining their austerity policies as an “attempt not to end up like the Greeks”. So unfortunately most Danish people would probably agree that the problems in Greece are of their own making (or of former Greek governments) - mismanagement of the economy and the lack of a proper taxation system.

There are no left parties in Denmark that have tried to explain the imposition of German type EU austerity policies as a means to further the (imperialist) interests of Germany – or the imbalances within the Euro zone as being used deliberately by Germany to boost its competitiveness and economy (although this is in fact the effect of these imbalances).

Explanations of German and French policies are more sophisticated. Germany and France are also the great powers within the EU and do have an influence reflecting this.

The Red-Green Alliance would not disregard the impact and consequences of the imbalances within the euro zone, which have certainly contributed to deepen divisions between working class people in Germany in particular and those in the periphery. It is an important task of the left to promote the understanding and consciousness of the working class concerning this and to make

them see that working class people have more in common across the borders than with their own ruling elites. The leaders of the countries of the periphery are the natural alliance partners with the leaders of Germany and France.

New developments on the Danish left – the trade union movement - new alliances?

As pointed out earlier both the crisis and in particular the austerity policies have changed the way that social classes in Denmark vote. Working class people – public sector workers especially – were angry with the former rightwing government and have been confused by the switch of the new Social Democratic-led government to the same economic policies – usually put into effect by entering into deals with the right wing of the parliament.

Many skilled workers especially would vote today for the big Liberal party “Venstre”. But many public sector and unskilled workers are turning to the Red-Green Alliance. There is a struggle and turmoil going on inside both the Social Democrats and SF due to these developments.

The result of the last parliamentary elections in September 2011 was an indication of the movements of working class voters, showing both a movement to the left – but also a radicalization of left voters as well as a general polarization of the Danish electorate. This contributed to making the new centre-left government a minority government depending on the seats of the Red-Green Alliance.

A recent opinion poll, made in the beginning of June just after a proposal for a new tax reform – funding tax reduction to the more well to do by reducing social benefits to the poor - was put forward by the government, shows a disastrous decline of both the Social Democrats and SF: The Social Democrats are down to below 17 % of the votes - 8 % down compared to their result in the elections last year - and SF down to 5 % compared to 9.2 % at the elections. The Red-Green Alliance was at 11.3 % in these opinion polls – with 6.7 % in the elections.

However, it should be noted that the winners according to these polls is the right wing – especially the liberal party “Venstre”, which is now at 34 % of the votes. This party seems to be attracting support both from the voters of other rightwing parties and from the Social Democrats.

This behaviour of the electorate – working class in particular – shows both a degree of confusion as well as some growing anti-systemic sentiment. It is often combined with an increasingly negative attitude to politicians.

But this has not fuelled the far right. The far right parliamentary party - the Danish People’s Party - has not been strengthened. At the same time it should be taken into account that this party has made a lot of efforts to streamline itself as a “responsible” parliamentary party. Of course still with its xenophobic and racist policies intact.

Tactics and strategy of the left

These developments have made it extremely difficult for the Red-Green Alliance to be a supporting party (although not a participating party) of the new centre-left government. Although the Red-Green Alliance was aware of the challenges this would entail, the party was not prepared to be faced with the fact that the centre-left government would move so much to the right with regard to economic and labour market policies that its natural political partners would be the right rather than the left in the parliament.

This has increased the political gap between the Social Democrats/SF and the Red-Green Alliance, and will deeply change the relations between the parties if these are permanent conditions. After the latest deal a couple of weeks ago between the government and the right wing parties on the new tax reform – a deal made over the heads of an RGA parliamentary delegation doing the finishing touches on a deal on the same tax reform - the Red-Green Alliance announced that it has now become an opposition party in the parliament. Since then the party has increased its membership by well over 1,500 new members to nearly 10,000 in total. In the opinion polls right now the RGA is at 13.9 % of the votes!

Within the trade union movement – traditionally very loyal to the Social Democrats – the rank-and-file seems increasingly to be no longer accepting this as a fact. In May this led to a breakdown in tripartite (between the government, the employers and the trade unions) negotiations on a new labour market reform, when the government proposed to cut two holidays – which was rejected by the trade union leadership after pressure from below.

It is hard to predict the outcome of this volatile situation and the alliances in the future. Originally it was the immediate perspective of the Red-Green Alliance to support the alternative government hoping to move it to the left by trying - together with trade unions and social and ecological movements – to promote more social/welfare and ecological policies and change the balance of forces. This will need some revision.

Transformation and emancipation

The starting point of any left tactics and strategy should of course naturally build on a position of strength nationally and locally – without it a left party or movement will make itself superfluous. This should of course be linked to a common left strategy of European and international transformation in cooperation with other (radical) left forces.

With regard to a transformation and emancipation in Europe the Red-Green Alliance believes that this would need a break with the EU (a revolution?), its treaties and institutions in order to create a different, social and democratic Europe. With the perspective of socialism Europe-wide and internationally in the longer term – depending on the balance of forces.

With the present unstable situation within the EU another realistic possibility, which should be taken into account, is also a breakdown of the Euro zone and the EU. This will lead to further destabilization and may very well be extremely dangerous if there are no alternatives.

The Red-Green Alliance still believes that leaving the EU could become a national option for Denmark in specific circumstances. These circumstances might become a reality with the present pressures to impose hard-line neo-liberalism within the EU. This is a tactical issue – not a strategic one: How to improve the conditions and the possibilities for ordinary people and how to strengthen the possibilities for alternatives and transformation.

Transformation and emancipation is not possible within the EU system, as the treaties and the institutions are built to centralize and reinforce a neoliberal system and economy – also by undermining democracy as a tool for change.

This said the Red-Green Alliance is in favour of supporting progressive reforms within the EU – although they are made increasingly difficult to realize with increasing EU integration. Even modest reforms may still be important seen in the larger perspective.

With its increasing popular support the Red-Green Alliance is now planning to have an internal discussion on whether to stand in the next European Parliament elections in 2014 – winning one seat in Denmark demands around 8 % of the votes (Denmark has 13 seats in the EP). So far the RGA has supported the EU critical movements in EP elections. The Danish People Movement's MEP, Søren Søndergaard, is an RGA member and former MP.

The end of Social Democracy ? – and the role of the radical left

The difficulties today of Social Democratic policies and reforms within the EU show how hard even modest reform has become within the EU. Our experiences since the elections in 2011 in a small place like Denmark (not in a situation like Greece) – as described in this article - show that adaptation to EU economic policies may spell the end of Social Democracy and even threaten to implode and demolish the parties built on Social Democracy.

The global economic crisis and the Euro crisis are being used by the EU leadership to impose a system that makes impossible any other policies than those of neo-liberalism. Social Democratic type reforms are easier outside the EU (e.g. the experiences in Latin America) than inside. The EU is becoming a neoliberal "Fortress Europe".

This gives the radical left a new important political role in Europe of today – and not only in southern Europe.

We are in a situation in which the "idea of Europe" and other idealistic dreams and notions about a "Europe of solidarity" between the peoples can very easily be used by the EU elites to the benefit of financial capital. Such ideas should no longer be linked to the EU – but to future alternatives in Europe. A much more critical position with regard to the EU is needed on the European radical left to reduce divisions on this issue.

The dramatic changes experienced during this time certainly need further analysis and discussion – especially concerning developing radical left tactics and strategy for the future.

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