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Denmark

Heading for a general strike in Denmark?

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On 1 March, collective agreements in the private sector will be renewed in Denmark. The top discussion, including in the mass media, is whether Denmark is heading for the first general strike in the private sector since 1998. [1]

There was already a high risk of conflict last autumn. In the meantime, the new bourgeois “middle government” consisting of the Social Democrats, the Liberals and a new bourgeois “middle party” has poured oil on the fire.

Background and introduction: Agreements and renewal:

In Denmark, pay and working conditions are set by collective agreements. These are negotiated directly between trade unions and employers’ organizations, and only a few key elements (holidays, working environment, anti-discrimination, etc.) are regulated by law. In short, most essential conditions are set by the social partners, for example the minimum wages. Agreements are negotiated every few years, depending on how long they have been in force, and during this period there is an obligation of “social peace”, which prohibits, for example, work stoppages, disputes, etc. Overall, this system has also contributed to the fact that we have very few conflicts in the Danish labour market. For employers, it is an effective safeguard for stable conditions in the labour market.

The current “main agreements” in the private labour market are due to expire on 1 March 2023. The parties must agree on new contracts, and members must then vote in favour of these before that date. The State Mediation Institution can postpone this deadline for up to 2 times 14 days, to allow additional time for negotiations.

We have a united trade union movement, which has historically had close links with social democracy.

The collective agreements were last renewed in 2020, for a three-year period and around 8.9% in pay progression. In the middle of the negotiations, the covid-19 pandemic broke out in Denmark and the country shut down. So even though key demands from the trade union movement had not been implemented, a huge majority of members chose to vote yes to this agreement.

With the recent development of inflation, and the associated loss of real wages for employees, the demands this time are extremely high. In addition, there are the demands from last time, which include effective safeguards against social dumping in the construction industry.

This is the challenge that the leadership of the trade union movement has been aiming to resolve, and resolve at a level that members could accept.

New bourgeois government - attacking collective agreements!

As if this challenge was not difficult enough, after the November elections, for the first time since 1979 Denmark got a government “across the centre” consisting of 3 parties:

Heading for a general strike in Denmark?

- The Social Democratic Party, which has historically led “red minority” governments as recently as 2019-2022, with the Red Green Alliance in the parliamentary majority.
- The Left, a bourgeois liberal party which has historically led “blue minority” governments and which is historically perceived as the mainstream party of government on the right.
- Moderates, a new bourgeois “centre party”, founded by the former Prime Minister of the Liberals.

For the first time since 1994, we also have a majority government in Denmark.

The basis of this new government is bourgeois economic policy. A key element has been the desire to abolish a public holiday in Denmark, called [“Store Bededag”](#).

The government has now proposed to abolish this holiday, including provisions to remove by law all labour agreements that mention this day as a day off, or that require increased payment for work on this holiday (usually a supplement of about 50% of wages)

This proposed legislative intervention has put the government directly on a collision course with the trade union movement. As of last week, it has mobilized Denmark’s largest petition against the government’s proposal, and has called for a nationwide demonstration in Copenhagen on Sunday, February 5, with the expectation of the largest demonstration since the “welfare movement” of the 2000s.

The government has its majority in place, despite massive public opposition. Parliament is now working to use the constitution’s provisions to force through a referendum, which has not happened since 1963.

Heading for a major conflict?

Either way, the deadline for negotiating collective agreements is approaching. And the fear is even if the negotiators manage to bargain a good agreement, with high pay rises and a range of other demands the members will still vote down the proposal if they are deprived of a public holiday from parliament at the same time. The trade-union movement leadership is very aware of this, and does not want to be in opposition to its own members. So the situation seems locked, and Denmark is moving closer to a major conflict every day.

Should a major conflict come into force, all organized workers in the private sector would be called out on strike, paid by the unions, and particularly key sectors would bring the country to a standstill. The most conspicuous is probably the transport sector, which will clearly stop the delivery of supplies to industry, supermarkets etc., but it will also close all possibilities for public transport, petrol to petrol stations, etc. So all sections of society would be directly affected.

In 1998, the conflict lasted 11 days before the government intervened by law to dictate a new collective agreement for the entire private sector, and to reintroduce compulsory peace for the next 2 years.

Should we have a major conflict, this time it will not be “just” about the struggle for redistribution in society. It will also be directly about how much we should work in our lives. If the government intervenes, it will lead to a new conflict against the government in power.

With all historical experience, it is an exciting time in Denmark and it could open up whole new possibilities for a left

Heading for a general strike in Denmark?

that has had difficulty finding itself and mobilizing in the last few years.

29 January 2023

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[1] See "Ten days that struck Denmark (a little)", *International Viewpoint* No 301 June 1998
<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/iv/iv-n301-jun-1998.pdf>.