

Norway's extreme right Progress Party wracked by internal feuding

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19 December 2000

In a venomous and highly public dispute, Norway's extreme right wing Progress Party (PP) has expelled 16 of its leading members from the Oslo area. Those kicked out are supporters of the party's national chairman and *Storting* (parliament) deputy Dag Danielsen. The expulsions represent an escalation of disputes that have festered for several years and revolve around the extent to which PP leader Carl I. Hagen is able to dictate policy.

Like right wing formations across Europe, the Progress Party has sought to gain from a widespread alienation from official politics, and Norway's Labour Party in particular. It has done this by presenting viciously racist and anti-working class policies dressed up in populist rhetoric. Since its foundation in the 1970s, the PP has advanced anti-immigrant measures, scapegoating them for Norway's social problems; it also proposes drastic tax and welfare cuts. The entire spectrum of Norwegian politics has subsequently embraced the PP's anti-immigrant agenda, while professing to oppose the party itself. As a consequence, Norway's immigration policy ranks among the tightest in Europe.

From a low in 1994—when its opinion poll rating went down to 3.5 percent—the Progress Party has recovered to the point where it superseded Labour as Norway's largest party in September, a position Labour had held since 1927. Although the PP has subsequently lost its leading position, the party, which receives millions of kroner in state funding, presently has 25 *Storting* seats and could be in a position to form or join a coalition government after next year's general elections.

Concerned that an outpouring of racist propaganda from his long-time party colleagues would disrupt relations with other parties and provoke broader political opposition, Hagen has insisted that he alone

can comment on the party's immigration policy. The party leadership has also moved against longstanding members viewed as an obstacle to coalition negotiations.

Last December Hagen was made aware of plans by Danielsen to remove him and 20 of his supporters from leading positions. In response, Hagen sought to manoeuvre his own people ahead of Danielsen's supporters in the lists for prospective *Storting* candidates.

In July, Hagen publicly declared that the party "needed a bit of tidying up." Two notoriously racist deputies, Vidar Kleppe and Øystein Hedstrøm, responded by holding a closed meeting of their immediate collaborators. Kleppe and Hedstrøm, among others, had previously attended meetings of the Norwegian Association—ostensibly a "think tank" which came out of the Popular Movement Against Immigration, which collapsed after one of its founder members was convicted of planning to bomb a refugee centre.

This autumn, Hagen launched unprecedented efforts to expel his opponents in advance of an Oslo branch extraordinary meeting. Alleging "disloyalty", Hagen described Danielsen as a "cancerous tumour". The 16 were expelled for up to 30 months and Hagen supporter Arve Lønnum was imposed as party leader in Oslo in place of Danielsen. Hagen is reported to be preparing further moves against Kleppe and Hedstrøm.

In response, Danielsen, his brother Per, a lawyer, and eight other banned officials launched an unprecedented and unsuccessful court case in the Oslo Court claiming that Hagen was "doing away with democracy in the Progress Party". Hagen claims to have received death threats saying, "we have hit men that can easily take you out today", calling on him to cease the expulsion

campaign.

It is indicative of the extent to which the PP has been accepted as part of the political establishment that the Norwegian press has weighed in to defend the rights of those expelled.

Dagsavisen opined in its November 27 edition, "Fortunately, it is rare for people to be thrown out of a party simply because the chairman does not like them. The process Mr Hagen has initiated against the leadership and other elected officers of the Oslo branch, the Progress Party's largest and traditionally most important county organisation, is cruel to those concerned, deeply undemocratic and, as a matter of principle, damaging to the entire party system and our parliamentary democracy."

Next day *Dagens Næringsliv* criticised the move for having alienated potential coalition partners, the Christian Democrats: "The trouble is that Mr Hagen must have the support of the Christian Democrats if he is to get into office. And the Christian Democrats are not particularly impressed by the current purge. So Mr Hagen risks losing both the chance of a major success in next autumn's general election and important alliance partners afterwards."

On December 4, *Aftenposten* stated that the events showed, "one of the country's largest parties has an organisational culture that is undemocratic, unworthy and therefore totally unacceptable in an enlightened democracy." However, it added, "We are, after all, dealing with a populist party, not a racist one. Infighting of the kind we have seen in the Progress Party, with its strange and nebulous mixture of political, organisational and personal conflicts, is most often found in populist parties."

Behind the media's supposed concern with PP inner-party democracy, and the fine distinction drawn between racism and populism, is a fear that the party will discredit itself at a time when it is being considered for government office by sections of the Norwegian bourgeoisie. With Labour slumping in the polls, the PP will figure prominently in talks for a future right wing coalition constructed with the intention of speeding up privatisation and the destruction of social welfare. A too searching examination of the Progress Party's viciously racist underbelly, as it is presently being exposed in the ongoing factional warfare, would undermine the possibility of it playing such a political

role.



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