

Norway's far-right Progress Party splits

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In a few short weeks, the simmering tensions within Norway's populist and far-right Progress Party have torn the organisation apart.

The conflict has exposed its vile internal relations, finally splitting the party between its most overt racists and the publicly more moderate members of the party leadership. Ostensibly caused by a series of sex scandals, the split has sacrificed what only last year was a historic lead over the Labour Party in the opinion polls, along with any chance of entering government after this autumn's election.

On February 8, Oslo *Storting* (parliament) deputy Dag Danielsen announced his resignation from the Progress Party, which had already expelled him. Danielsen, having fought and lost a court case to be allowed to retain party membership, announced his intention to put together a "rebel" list of individuals who intended to stand against official Progress candidates. Danielsen's differences with party leader Carl I. Hagen hinge on the extent to which Hagen could dictate policy, thereby restraining the most racist and fascist elements within the organisation, including Danielsen.

The same weekend, two young female members claimed that leading Progress officials had raped them. The allegations, which appear to have been rumbling around for months, were directed specifically at Hagen's right hand man and expected successor Terje Søviknes, and Oslo youth leader Chim Kjølnør. Søviknes, also a local mayor in the town of Os, near Bergen, denied committing rape, but eventually admitted having sex with a drunken 16-year-old at a Progress Party social event. Søviknes' political career may well have been destroyed, despite Hagen's best efforts to defend him. He has suspended his duties as mayor, and faces a vote of no confidence from rival local political parties. Chim Kjølnør denied the rape allegation and challenged his accuser to press charges,

while temporarily resigning from his party post. For a while, the press was filled with salacious stories of riotous parties, and widespread sexual abuse of young Progress Party members.

Whatever the truth of the allegations, their sudden exposure is part of a campaign by Danielsen, and forces around another Progress deputy Vidar Kleppe, to destabilise the Hagen leadership. Kleppe had reported some of the allegations to Hagen, and is supporting the family of one of the alleged rape victims. Hagen, naming Kleppe personally, complained, "There's been a concerted effort to undermine confidence in the existing leadership. It took [them] just four years to take over the Oslo branch of the party".

After the initial press frenzy abated, 17 of the party's *Storting* deputies announced they did not trust Kleppe and refused to discuss internal political matters with him. Moves were inaugurated to prevent his re-election to the *Storting*. Kleppe was suspended from party membership on March 7 and promptly announced his intention to oppose his expulsion on the basis of its undemocratic nature. As in previous internal spats within Progress, the Norwegian press weighed in on the side of Kleppe, professing disgust for his policies but alarm at Hagen's personal autocracy within the organisation.

Aftenposten opined, "Ever since Carl I. Hagen conceived the vision of the Progress Party as the leading alternative to Labour, both in the *Storting* and as a senior party in a government coalition, leeway for individual views has shrunk month by month."

Since its founding, the Progress Party has been utilised by the Norwegian bourgeoisie to push official politics to the right. The media, and the Labour, Conservative, and Christian Democratic parties routinely denounce Hagen and his allies, only then for the political establishment to adapt to their demands. Hagen is presented as a robust character and "voice of

the people", able to say the unspeakable. Progress has led decades of witch-hunts aimed at immigrants and those on welfare. This has left Norway with the most aggressive anti-immigrant policies in Europe, with immigrant workers often being subject to racist violence. Earlier this year, a fascist gang in Oslo murdered Benjamin Labaran Hermansen, a 15-year-old Norwegian of Ghanaian extraction.

Until the present crisis, the Progress Party had been expected to be a participant in post-election negotiations to form a new coalition government. Hagen has been directing the party towards playing such a role, and for the last year has sought to rein in the most overtly racist elements. This has only been possible by extending Hagen's own autocratic rule inside the organisation, making himself the sole arbiter of party policy. This has now blown up in his face, exposing Progress as the political sewer it always was.

Immediately following his suspension, Kleppe announced his intention to stand for the "Southern List" of disgruntled Progress members, while Dag Danielsen and some Oslo supporters announced that they had taken over the Liberal Peoples Party. This moribund body's sole member and founder, Tor Ingar Østerud, apparently handed the organisation over for the price of a cup of coffee, thereby allowing Danielsen et al to avoid raising the 5,000 signatures necessary to found a new political party able to stand candidates. Hagen responded by threatening to launch another wave of scandals against Kleppe.

Eventually the Norwegian press decided they had had enough, washing their hands of the Progress Party. *Dagens Næringsliv* piously intoned, "We have no high opinion of either Mr Hagen or Mr Kleppe as politicians, and the events of this winter have made them no more appetising. They are beginning to remind us forcibly of common louts. We would not shed a tear if the Progress Party disintegrated and was abandoned in disgust by the unaccountably large number of people who have supported it... After this winter's blood-letting in the Progress Party it would be a political profanity to offer Mr Hagen a warm and comfortable seat in government."

In the meantime, Progress's share in the opinion polls has collapsed to a mere 11 points, down from 30 percent last October, when the organisation replaced Labour as Norway's largest party, for the first time

since 1927.

The willingness of the press to dump Progress after years of encouragement indicates the nervousness in ruling circles over the escalating social tensions in Norwegian society, which would be enflamed by having the anti-welfare and anti-immigrant Progress Party in government. Last year, tens of thousands of workers went on strike for higher pay, in a movement whose strength reflected anger at the growing inequality in Norwegian society. Protests against Benjamin Hermansen's killing in January involved the largest demonstrations seen in Norway for decades. Even the 30 percent vote briefly won by Progress reflected political alienation from Labour, rather than deeply rooted support for the Progress Party.

For the moment, the Norwegian ruling class has concluded that a more moderate sounding government, better able to prosecute Norway's interests in moves to join the European Union is necessary. Current speculation is focussing on the present administration being replaced by either a Labour-led coalition with the Socialist Left, or possibly a Christian Democrat-led coalition headed by ex Prime Minister Kjell Bondevik.



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