

Norway: left parties and trade unions embrace far-right Progress Party

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Since the 2001 Norwegian general elections the far-right anti-immigrant Progress Party has come to dominate the country's political landscape, despite not being in the Conservative, Christian Democrat and Liberal coalition led by Prime Minister Kjell Bondevik.

Currently, Progress is sustaining a 24 percent rating in the opinion polls and has ousted both the Norwegian Labour Party and the Conservatives as the country's largest political group. The minority government depends on Progress's support for its legislative programme and according to some opinion polls, 49 percent of voters want Progress to join the government.

Only last year Progress ripped itself apart in a series of squalid feuds between the clique around party leader Carl I. Hagen and overtly fascistic elements in the ranks. At the time, it seemed that Progress might disintegrate, with rival lists of Storting (parliament) candidates being proposed from inside and outside the party. Although Progress won 26 seats in the 165-seat parliament, the main winner in the elections was the Conservative Party, which recovered from its 1997 rout to become the biggest party. Subsequently, however, Progress's support has mushroomed at the expense of all the leading parties, particularly Labour—long Norway's largest party—whose support is falling rapidly.

Immediately after the election, Progress took a stand on the national budget showing the role they hoped to carve out for themselves. Party finance spokesman Siv Jensen refused to support the budget on the basis that more of Norway's considerable oil wealth should be spent on social measures, while budgeted tax cuts of 7.5 billion krone (\$838 million) should be greater. Bondevik was forced to call a vote of confidence to get the budget through. In the end Progress supported the government, but the point had been made. Progress

could bring the government down at any time were it to so decide.

Apparent concern for the poorest in Norway forms a component of Progress's attempt to win popular support. The party has adopted a similar stand on several issues—incorporating dental care into the national health service, payments for childcare and free artificial insemination for childless couples. Progress is taking advantage of the deep hostility to the Labour Party and contempt for the political establishment, due to the attacks on social conditions by successive governments. But this is an exceedingly thin veneer, covering a party dedicated to cutting taxes by removing welfare support.

The party has also placed itself to the right of the Conservatives on defence and law and order issues. It opposed a decision to cut military spending, while Hagen attacked the Supreme Court for its supposedly lenient sentencing policy and for being too concerned with "human rights and so on." He called for more Storting control over the judiciary.

The party has maintained its hostility to immigrants, while the government and police have largely adopted Progress demands. When the government proposed to arrest any asylum seekers without passports, Progress immediately supported the measure, as did the Labour Party. In April, the National Bureau of Crime Investigation boss, Arne Huuse, claimed, "The price of integrating foreigners into Norwegian society is starting to get too high." Justice Minister Odd Einar Dørum said during the ensuing debate, "The benefits of immigration must not blind us to what is wrong. Immigration is also the importation of violence." The government has also targeted Roma immigrants for deportation, and has called for a new isolated refugee centre in the far north of the country.

Hagen, in common with similar parties across Europe, is seeking to use the political vacuum generated by the collapse of the Labour Party and most other traditional national parties, to catapult Progress to power.

In this he has been aided by the efforts of both the Labour Party and the Socialist Left to cuddle up to Progress and compete with its rightwing agenda. For some years, Labour has worked with Progress on individual issues. In 1999 they worked together to bring down the previous Bondevik administration. When Labour were in power, Hagen was able to pose as the oppositional “voice of the common man”. With Labour back in opposition, collaboration with Progress has deepened on a number of welfare and asylum issues.

Agreements with the former Stalinists and pacifists of the Socialist Left are a more recent development. The Socialist Left has been the main beneficiary of Labour’s collapse in support. At the elections, the party won 23 seats, and now outstrips Labour in the opinion polls. In June the Socialist Left entered a parliamentary agreement with Labour, the Centre Party and Progress to push for a cap on nursery school payment costs. The Socialist Left, Progress and Labour have also agreed that a portion of Norway’s famous Petroleum Fund, made up from oil revenue, should be spent on increased scientific funding.

The Socialist Left has also moved towards Progress’ stand on immigration, insisting that more demands should be put on immigrants, incorporating obligatory work training, and stricter integration measures. Those who refuse should suffer economic consequences.

Further endorsement for Progress was given by the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, the LO. The LO currently contribute financially to both the Labour Party and the Socialist Left. The surprise speaker at Progress’ annual conference in April was LO leader, Gerd-Liv Valla, who opened her remarks by hailing the Progress Party as “comrades”. While claiming that she still opposed some of the party’s comments against immigrants, she hoped they could find agreement on workers’ rights. She went on to say that such agreements were preferable to allowing more immigrants into the country.

Valla’s appearance at the Progress conference was hailed in the press as evidence of Progress’s new respectability. Much newspaper commentary calls on

Progress to enter the government, although at this point the Conservatives are divided on the matter and the Christian Democrats oppose it.

Hagen’s time may be coming. Although the Norwegian economy is buoyed up with vast oil wealth, profit levels of its leading corporations are down 50 percent this year, while small but significant wage increases for sections of the working class have been condemned by heads of industry. As in neighbouring Netherlands and Denmark, the deep disaffection felt by broad sections of working people is being manipulated in order to allow the installation of ever more right wing governments intent on deepening attacks on welfare and hounding immigrants.



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