

# Unions work to close down Scandinavian healthcare strikes

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2 June 2008

Public sector strikes in Sweden and Denmark involving healthcare workers as well as many in the caring profession recently entered their second month.

In a new development last Saturday, 3,500 nurses, day-care teachers and schoolteachers took strike action in Norway. They are demanding a 7 percent pay rise, striking after employers refused to offer more than 3.5 percent. From May 29, another 4,900 workers joined the action.

In Denmark, in spite of attempts by the trade unions to impose a deal that would fall short of the original demand of 15 percent over three years, the strike grew on May 19 as 13,000 teachers at day-care centers joined the walkout. They are members of BUPL, the union that had agreed on a 12.8 percent pay rise with the Danish Local authorities (KL) last month. When the agreement was put to a vote of the union's members, it was voted down by 61 percent.

Members of the FOA trade union were also offered a settlement that fell short of their 15 percent demands, when on May 5 it was announced that an agreement had been reached to increase wages by 13.9 percent over the three-year period. It was then revealed that, should the deal be accepted, many members would see no benefit since it would not apply to those under the employment of the Association of Danish Regions.

FOA's members, day-care assistants and care workers, returned to work before the ballot was held, in what was a clear attempt by the union to force through the deal. On May 30, it was announced that a majority of members had accepted the offer. The Danish Nurses Association, all of whose members are on strike, stated its intention to continue the action until the 15 percent increase is met. Nevertheless, it is clear that the trade unions are all working to ensure a quick end to the dispute.

The president of KL, Eric Fabrin, declared, "We have to show solidarity with the parents and then consider what we can offer, so that this conflict doesn't stretch over the entire summer."

The trade union leaderships have demonstrated over the course of the strike that they are opposed to a struggle

against the government should it intervene to impose a lower wage increase on its members. The president of BUPL, whose members joined the strike on May 19, merely urged the government to permit the strike. "I hope that we can be allowed to strike and that the government will stay out of it. Our members have sent a clear message that they wish to strike. Now we have to put pressure on the municipalities."

With FOA reaching an agreement with employers, it is to be expected that BUPL will attempt to impose yet another sell-out on its members.

The strike by Swedish nurses was concluded on Wednesday, May 28, when the healthcare union Vardförbundet voted to accept a deal that fell short of its original demands. A vote of 201 members who had gathered for a "special meeting" accepted the deal, which promises wage increases of 4 percent, 3 percent and 2 percent over the three-year period. This does not even come close to reaching the 15 percent over two years the union had been formally demanding. Significantly, it was announced that the contract has the option to be cancelled after only two years, something that would permit employers to increase the downward pressure on the wages of healthcare workers.

Hailed by officials as an agreement containing "unbelievable possibilities," instead of a minimum guaranteed salary of 22,000 kronor per month, the original goal of the strike, Vardförbundet's members would be forced to accept 21,100 kronor. Even worse, this will only take effect from March 2009.

On May 13, Vardförbundet had announced that a further 4,000 of its members would join the strike on May 29. It accepted the deal just before this expansion of the strike was to have taken place.

The refusal of the union leaderships to conduct any struggle against the right-wing governments in both countries is bound up with the close and intimate relationship they enjoy with the state and employers. In Scandinavia, particularly, the unions have a history of systematic collaboration with their respective governments functioning as industrial policemen over the working class.

While it was previously possible to extract certain limited benefits for workers within this national and class collaborationist set-up, such circumstances no longer exist. The opening up of the Scandinavian economies to competition on the world market is a process that has sped up over the past decade. The political establishment, whether nominally “left of center” Social Democrats or right-wing conservatives, have both cut taxes and increased the involvement of the private sector.

This would not have been possible without the close collaboration of the unions, which have worked to impose the demands of the ruling elites on workers, some 80 percent of whom are union members.

Sweden has seen a vast liberalisation of employment regulations and a drive to privatise state assets that has been stepped up by the right-wing Alliance government since 2006, but which had been embraced by the Social Democrats since the late 1990s.

The freeing of employers from the obligation of contributing to sickness benefits, the reduction of the amount of paid sick leave to which workers are entitled, and the reduction of support given to those who are unemployed are just some of the measures adopted.

In tandem with this, the Alliance continues to preside over a vast sale of state-owned companies to private bidders in an endeavour to substantially increase competition and reduce state involvement. It is a measure of the confidence with which the government views the union bureaucracy that as the nurses’ strike progressed, a bill was passed through parliament that opens up the Swedish pharmaceutical sector to private competition, a process that will lead to profiteering at the expense of the health of ordinary people.

Previously, all medicines in Sweden have been sold from state-owned stores. The new proposal will allow for individual stores to be taken over by private outfits, as well as the introduction of competition into the markets for prescription and non-prescription drugs.

Simultaneously, a proposal went through parliament on May 20 that will end subsidised public healthcare for illegal immigrants. This measure received the support of the Social Democrats as well as the government. These attacks on some of the most disadvantaged sections of society are designed to create scapegoats for growing social troubles.

In Denmark, strikers are coming under attack from sections of the media. Over the past week, newspapers attempted to turn the public against the strikers by seizing on the death of a patient awaiting heart surgery. Stories appeared claiming that the strike had “caused its first death” and that if the dispute was not resolved soon, the number would increase.

As was pointed out on a blog posted by a Danish worker,

the severe cuts to public health initiated by the Rasmussen government since 2001 have unquestionably resulted in numerous patient deaths due to decreasing standards of care in the public health system.

Another area where the government is keen to reduce its responsibility is care for the elderly. Last month, Social Welfare Minister Karen Jespersen claimed that the responsibility of caring for the elderly population should rest on relatives. “As a typical family member or close friend, one should take on the responsibilities we have for one another as human beings,” Jespersen commented. “And I will try to make this idea clear through the law.”

As the strike in Denmark progressed, a report appeared in the *Nyhedsavisen* newspaper detailing how the first fully private hospital would be opening from August 1 in the town of Frederiksberg. This institution will enable “customers” to pay to be treated immediately and deny those who cannot.

For workers in Denmark, a wage increase of 15 percent over three years at best would barely meet inflation. In Copenhagen, which has been rated the second most expensive city in the world to live, it would have no chance of meeting rising costs.

This is the environment within which the unions are restricting workers to wage demands against individual employers, while opposing a political fight against the ruling establishment across Scandinavia. With strikes affecting Sweden, Norway and Denmark and the dispute in Finland taking place within the past six months, the potential for such a movement is clear. But the unions have done and will continue to do nothing to develop such a struggle. Rather, they are intent on bringing the strikes to an end as swiftly as possible.



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