

Danish government introduces border controls

Jordan Shilton
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In a move signalling the end of “open borders” in Europe, Denmark’s right-wing minority government announced on Wednesday that it was unilaterally re-introducing controls at its borders with Sweden and Germany. The move will see border guards stationed to inspect vehicles at Danish frontiers within a matter of weeks.

The decision was timed to pre-empt discussion of the Schengen system at a European Union (EU) meeting in Brussels on Thursday. Schengen allows for freedom of movement between its 25 members. In the event, the meeting demonstrated that far from acting alone, the stance taken by Denmark has broad support within the EU, including from some leading members.

The reintroduction of controls came as a result of an agreement between the minority conservative-liberal coalition in Copenhagen, and the far right Danish Peoples Party (DF). DF has had significant influence over government policy for a decade, cooperating with the coalition to impose the strictest immigration regime within the EU. At the same time, it has used every available opportunity to whip up nationalist sentiment within Denmark.

Significantly, the decision was a concession offered by Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen in exchange for DF support for a severe austerity drive over the next period, which will see cuts of 48 billion kroner (US\$9.2 billion) by 2020. Entitlements to benefits are to be overhauled, early retirement schemes abolished, and a reduction in public spending of 2 percent of GDP per year.

It is not merely coincidence that the Danish measure introducing border controls was attached to the government’s austerity programme to slash the country’s budget deficit by 2020. The agreement between the coalition and the DF makes clear the

relationship between anti-immigrant chauvinism and the assault on the livelihoods of the working class as a whole.

It is claimed that border controls must be reintroduced in order to limit a sharp rise in crimes committed by “eastern Europeans” across the country. This was a theme taken up by the coalition, with ministers asserting that it was necessary to curb cross-border and organised crime.

Such claims are absurd, and are designed to divert attention away from the context in which the decision takes place. Even the Danish police exposed the government’s position in the days leading up to the announcement. In a report first released in 2009 but which was still supported by the National Police earlier this month, the adoption of border checks was rejected. The report stated, “A return to controlled borders is, according to the National Police’s judgment, neither a necessary nor a desirable instrument for fighting cross-border crime.”

Mainstream commentary on the Danish position sought to focus on the growing influence of the far right, with a number of articles stating that the government in Copenhagen had “capitulated” or “given in” to far right pressure.

This suggests that such policies are being adopted somewhat reluctantly by the major parties, when the reality is that the Danish position is finding growing support throughout the ruling elites of Europe and is no longer merely the preserve of the far right. It is seen as a vital means by which the working class can be divided. The return to controlled borders is inseparable from the imposition of vicious austerity measures across the continent in the interests of the financial elite.

At the same time, recent months have shown that

there are mounting tensions within the EU itself. These disputes found initial expression over the question of the Greek bailout and subsequent proposals to restructure Greek debt, which placed France and Germany at odds. With Europe confronting an ever deepening crisis, the reinstitution of border checks is a further sign of the growth of national rivalries and antagonisms.

Initially reacting with surprise to the Danish announcement, Germany pushed for essentially the same approach at the meeting of EU interior ministers on Thursday. According to a report in the British-based *Guardian*, Berlin was backed by France, Austria and the Czech Republic when it insisted that the powers should rest with national governments to determine border controls. Fifteen out of the 22 Schengen members in the EU were in favour of allowing the decision on border controls to be handed back to national governments.

EU diplomats were quick to deny that free movement was under threat. EU commission President José Manuel Barroso wrote a letter to the Danish government denouncing its decision, stating that he believed Copenhagen could be in breach of EU treaty law. EU commissioner for Justice Cecilia Malmström, who raised the threat of legal action stated, “We will not weaken Schengen in any way. This is one of the best things in Europe from a citizen’s point of view.”

Framed as a benefit for ordinary European “citizens,” concern within ruling circles about the re-establishment of borders is driven far more by business interests. As Andrew Hill explained in a blog posting in the *Financial Times*, “Think how many companies’ strategies are now based on the principle of free movement of people and goods between the 25 members of the zone... Among the first beneficiaries of the lifting of continental European border controls in the early 1990s were trucking companies and their customers. Nobody’s suggesting re-imposing the paperwork that used to swamp lorry-drivers at EU border crossings, but the more clogged the frontier, the less profitable the cross-border traders.”

Officials sought to insist that the changes would not breach the existing Schengen agreement, but would merely allow for “temporary” controls to be imposed under specific conditions. As French interior minister Claude Gueant commented after the meeting, “A very

wide consensus, if not near unanimity, was reached on the commission proposals.”

The possibility of large numbers of immigrants trying to escape to Europe from North Africa has been used to justify the clampdown. The media has alleged that state repression against the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East will force thousands to seek refuge elsewhere. It has further been claimed that Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi is “allowing” migrant workers to flee Libya in an attempt to put pressure on NATO to pull back from its support for the “rebel” Transitional National Council.

While in fact the rise in migration from North Africa has been negligible, Italy seized on the arrival of several thousand immigrants earlier in the year to raise the issue within the EU. Rome decided to issue temporary travel visas to all of the immigrants, a move which resulted in the closure of border crossings with France, as Paris sought to prevent the entry of immigrants to the country. Shortly afterwards, at a bilateral summit in April, both France and Italy urged that Schengen be reformed to grant more powers to national governments.



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