

Danish elections bring Social Democrats to power

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The Danish elections on September 15 led to a change of government, but the assumption of power by the so-called “Red block” under the leadership of the Social Democrat Helle Thorning-Schmidt by no means represents a political shift to the left.

Thorning-Schmidt declared fulsomely at her victory celebration that “Denmark has voted for a new politics.” But the Social Democrats have taken power to continue the implementation, in the midst of the deepest economic crisis in decades, of the austerity policies of her conservative-liberal predecessors. Nor will she change the substance of their restrictive immigration policies.

Thorning-Schmidt belongs to the right wing of the Social Democratic party in Denmark. Her opponents call her “Gucci Helle” because of her fashion preferences. Before her tenure in the Danish parliament, the Folketing, she was a European MP.

Her career has included working as a consultant for the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions. On a personal level, she is the daughter-in-law of the right-wing former British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock.

She achieved her election victory with the worst result for her party in 108 years. The Social Democrats received only 24.9 percent of the vote. Her future coalition partners increased their votes. The Sozialistische Volkspartei (Socialist People’s Party—SF) obtained 9.2 percent and the social-liberal Radikale Venstre (Radical Liberals) received 9.5 percent. The Linke Enhedsliste (Left Unity List) increased its share of votes from 2.2 percent to 6.7 percent.

The SF and the Enhedsliste, which present themselves as the “left,” were able to take votes from the Social Democrats because of voter discontent with the destruction of the welfare state. Many workers no longer trust the Social Democrats, believing quite correctly that they will not defend the social gains for which generations of workers fought.

The new ruling coalition between the Social Democrats, the social liberals and the Socialist People’s Party has a combined total of just 89 of the 179 parliamentary seats, meaning it lacks a majority. The Enhedsliste, which is supported by various petit-bourgeois parties and organisations, has made itself available to provide the needed votes to give the coalition a majority. With the help of the Enhedsliste, the ruling coalition will be able to count on a total of 92 votes in parliament.

The strongest party remains the previous ruling party, the conservative-liberal Venstre (Liberals), headed by Lars Løkke Rasmussen. However, its former coalition partner, the Conservatives, lost 10 seats, and the Liberal Alliance received just 5 percent of the vote.

The conservative-liberal minority government was unable to retain power, despite support from the right-wing populist Dänische Volkspartei (DF), led by Pia Kjaersgaard. The DF, which has been the driving force behind reactionary immigration policies in Denmark, remains the third largest party. It won 12.3 percent of the vote, a decline from its total in the previous election.

Denmark called early elections in response to the economic and financial crisis, as had Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Spain. Rasmussen (Venstre) was hoping to win a clear mandate for his austerity measures. Now, he will delegate this task to the Social Democrats, who will be in a better position to use the trade unions to suppress working class opposition.

In response to pressure from right-wing populists, Rasmussen’s government came into conflict with the European Union (EU) when Denmark restored border controls that had been abolished under the Schengen agreement. This created problems for Danish business interests, as EU member states are important markets for the Danish export industry.

The Social Democrats are in agreement with most of the economic policies of the former government. They share the view that the working class must bear the costs of the financial crisis and the bank bailouts. Already last year, Thorning-Schmidt put pressure on the trade unions to accept a lengthening of the work week, a measure that has to date added 15 billion Kronen (€2.1 billion) to the state coffers.

Now, she wants to stimulate the stagnating economy through a “kick start” programme, proposing that it be initially funded with credit and later through a statutory lengthening of the work week by an additional hour, together with increased taxes for those earning more than €134,000 per year. The Sozialistische Volkspartei supports this policy.

Denmark’s socio-economic system had long been held up as a role model, but since 2008 it has taken a nosedive. According to a recent study by the Hamburg Stiftung für Zukunftsfragen (Institute for the

Study of the Future), the Danish were judged to be the “happiest” people in Europe. But this situation has drastically changed over the last few years. After a period of boom and prosperity, Denmark has been harshly impacted by the economic and financial crisis.

Danish exports are suffering from the global recession, and the unemployment rate has risen from zero to 5 percent. The property market, an important economic factor, is in recession. Industrial production has fallen. The banking sector has had to write off €1.2 billion.

The Danish state budget deficit, caused primarily by the bank bailout programme, will be about 3.8 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) this year, according to government forecasts. For 2012, the deficit is forecast to be even higher—4.6 percent.

The now-ousted centre-right government responded to the growing crisis by moving further to the right. Denmark has taken part in the imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This aggressive foreign policy was designed, in part, to distract people from domestic problems and help weld together the internally fractious ruling coalition.

In the summer of 2010, there were mass demonstrations in front of the parliament building against the radical austerity measures introduced by the Rasmussen government. Concern over the social cuts was the main reason for the high voter turnout of 87.7 percent in last week’s election.

The right-wing Radikale Venstre, which has offered its services as a coalition partner to the Social Democrats, is in broad agreement with most of the latter’s policies and will at most put forward a few cosmetic “green” variations. Between the two, there are no significant differences in policy concerning Europe, the economy and defence.

The other coalition party, the Sozialistische Volkspartei (SF), describes itself as being to the left of the Social Democrats. When the latter proposed a neo-liberal policy, many of its members left to join the SF. The SF has similar policies to those of the Green Party, to whose fraction it adheres in the European Parliament, even though, because of its critical stance regarding the EU, it enjoys only observer status in the European Green Party.

The SF emerged in 1959 from a faction of the Danish Communist Party that was critical of the Soviet suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. At the European level, it has collaborated with the New European Left Forum (NELF), the German Left Party and the Greek Synaspismos movement. The SF increased its vote in the parliamentary elections of 2007, which the Social Democrats lost.

The incoming coalition will have to rely on the Einheitsliste to obtain a majority vote in parliament. The Einheitsliste promises its support but declines to formally join the coalition. Its votes had proved decisive at critical points during the previous Social Democratic government under Poul Nyrup Rasmussen. The Einheitsliste is, like the German Left Party, a member of the European Left Party (EL) and the European Anti-Capitalist Left (EAL).

The Einheitsliste presents itself as the parliamentary representative

of the ecological and anti-globalisation movement. It was founded in 1989 as an electoral alliance between the Left Socialists (Venstresocialisterne—VS), the Communist Party (DKP) and the Socialist Workers Party (Socialistisk Arbejderparti—SAP) as well as other “left” organisations.

In 1991, it was joined by the former Maoist Communist Workers Party (Kommunistisk Arbejderparti—KAP) and the Aktive Socialist Forum (Aktivt Socialistisk Forum—ASF). The electoral alliance was a reaction to the collapse of the Stalinist parties, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement.

The Left Socialists have been in the Danish Parliament for a long time. They emerged out of the student and anti-Vietnam War protest movement at the end of the 1960s. From 1967 to 1987, they consistently had between four and six parliamentary representatives. The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe threw them into deep crisis. From 1994 to 2001, they developed their new role of serving as a prop for Social Democratic governments by ensuring that the Social Democrats obtained majority votes in parliament.

The DKP is a former Stalinist party, while the SAP is the Danish section of the Pabloite revisionist organisation that broke from the Fourth International in 1953—the so-called United Secretariat of the Fourth International. The SAP originated in 1980 as the Revolutionære Socialister Forbund (RSF).

The Einheitsliste’s top candidate is the young Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen. She became prominent as an activist in the economic summit demonstrations in Prague, Brussels, Göteborg and Rostock. A partisan of gender and environmental politics, she gained a sufficient number of followers to obtain a seat in the Folketing in the last election.

The direction taken by the Einheitsliste is indicated by its opportunistic zig-zag responses to the NATO war against Libya. At first, it supported the war, but then made a U-turn when it realised that its “left” image could be harmed by being implicated in an imperialist blood bath. In the Danish parliament, the Einheitsliste will play the important role of giving the right-wing policies of the new government a “left” cover.



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