

70,000 Danish teachers locked out

Helmut Arens and Christoph Dreier
24 April 2013

In a historically unprecedented act, the Danish government has locked out 70,000 high school teachers for more than three weeks. The lockout means that the teachers have been without pay for this period, and the education and care of nearly 800,000 school students have been severely jeopardised.

The Municipal Employers Association imposed the lockout on April 2 after permitting contract negotiations with the teachers' union, the Danish Union of Teachers (DLF), to break down. The aim of the employers' association is to place maximum pressure on teachers to agree to increased flexibility and a longer working week.

Specifically, the employers' association wants to install a scheme whereby the heads of individual schools have a free hand to determine the relationship between teaching and preparation hours and total working times, thereby overturning the current maximum of 25 teaching hours per week.

On the basis of these "reforms", teaching time is to be extended while maintaining existing staff levels—i.e., without the recruitment of new teachers. Teachers have pointed out that the planned proposals will have drastic consequences for the quality of teaching and the working conditions of teachers. Denmark's once highly regarded education system is to be systematically laid to waste.

The driving force behind the actions of the local employers association is the Danish government, a coalition of the Social Democrats, Social Liberals and Socialist People's Party, and tolerated by the "far left" Red-Green Alliance. The role of the government is made clear from a contract between the treasury and one of its departments responsible for supposedly modernising and increasing the efficiency of public services.

According to labour market experts, the document proves that the government has opened up a new

offensive against the wages and working hours of public service workers. "The document shows that the government is pursuing the clear and unambiguous aim of using contract bargaining as a means to increase economic efficiency", policy researcher Jorgen Christensen told the *Politiken* newspaper. "Here you have it in black and white that they want to use contract bargaining as a lever to lower costs. I've never seen anything like it", added labour market researcher, Flemming Ibsen.

The federal "centre-left" coalition government is overriding existing contract agreements in Denmark, which officially prevent the government from taking sides in collective bargaining.

The government intends to use the teachers to set an example for the entire public service: whoever refuses to accept cuts and austerity measures will be locked out and removed from the payroll. The choice of such a sensitive area as the education system, where the lockout affects virtually every family in the country, demonstrates the resolve of the government. Nurses, doctors, care assistants and others can all expect the same treatment.

The government is preparing to attack the entire public service sector and devastate the country's educational, health and social systems in order to appease the financial elite.

In February the Danish cabinet approved the reduction of corporate tax from 25 to 22 percent. The previous government had cut the top rate of income tax from 63 to 56 percent in 2009. The subsequent massive holes in federal and state budgets resulting from the loss in tax revenue are now to be filled at the expense of ordinary workers. In line with the debt ceiling limits dictated by the European Union, the Danish government has also committed itself to reducing the structural budget deficit by 1.5 percent per annum.

The drastic offensive by the Danish government

makes clear that the aim of the ruling elite is to impose Greek-style conditions throughout Europe. This strategy is to be imposed in the more affluent northern nations of Europe such as Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany, as well as in Portugal, Spain and Italy.

The education sector plays a crucial role in this respect. The financial elite is seeking to eliminate billions of euros of taxpayers' money from education budgets and divert that into their own pockets. The social attacks in Greece began with the abolition of free teaching materials and culminated with the closure of schools and universities, as well as the axing of 13,000 teaching posts.

In Germany, teachers are also under attack with new members of the profession expected to work for ever-shrinking salaries, and workers in the eastern part of the country required to work for less than teachers in western Germany. A strike by German teachers aimed at ending this situation was recently broken off by the teachers' trade unions. In Spain, thousands of substitute teachers have been dismissed and the working hours of permanent employees increased. The list of such attacks goes on and on.

Like their counterparts across Europe, Danish teachers are prepared to fight, and enjoy broad support in the working population. Protests and solidarity actions for the teachers are being held on almost a daily basis. On April 11, 50,000 people gathered in front of the parliament building, the Christiansborg Palace in Copenhagen, to protest against the lockout. Those protesting spoke out clearly against the deterioration of the country's education system.

For its part, the DLF union is doing all it can to isolate the protests and steer them into harmless channels. It has undertaken a series of toothless activities in front of town halls aimed at diverting attention from the brutal character of the government's actions and presenting the entire conflict as a run-of-the-mill labour dispute. Neither the other Danish trade unions nor the international teacher trade unions have organised any serious solidarity action.

The government's attacks on social gains have received backing from the Red-Green Alliance, a coalition of the Left Socialists (VS), the Stalinist Danish Communist Party (DKP), the Maoist Communist Workers Party (KAP) and the Socialist Workers Party (SAP), the Danish section of the fake

Trotskyist "United Secretariat", which received 6.5 percent of the vote in the last election.

The Red-Green Alliance voted with the government in favour of the austerity budgets of 2012 and 2013, thereby securing it the necessary majority—defending this support as a means of pushing the government "to the left". In fact, such support was the precondition for the historic attacks now mounted by that government with its current offensive and lockout.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact