

# Danish government forces teachers to work longer hours without pay

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In summary proceedings on Friday, the Danish parliament passed a special law which stipulates that approximately 70,000 school teachers must work extra hours and accept more flexibility. In addition, the part-time teaching arrangement for teachers over 60 years is to be abolished. The law violates contract bargaining practice and is the prelude to similar attacks throughout the public service.

The minority government of Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, consisting of the Social Democrats, the Radical Left (RV) and the Green Socialist People's Party, has received support for its offensive against teachers from almost all parties represented in parliament. Only the neo-liberal Liberal Alliance (LA) and the pseudo-left Red-Green Unity List (EL) voted against the motion.

With the adoption of the special law the government has ended the lockdown of teachers imposed by the local employers' association (KL). For four weeks teachers were prevented from carrying out their work and almost 900,000 students aged 6 to 16 years were denied any education. The KL sought to use the lockdown to force teachers to approve the extension of their working hours.

The latest intervention of the government complies in all material respects to the original demands raised by the KL. From now on, head teachers and local authorities can independently determine how many hours a teacher should teach, and how many hours should be devoted to preparing lessons. Until now the Danish system stipulated an upper limit for teaching of 25 hours a week.

Together with the national provision to extend the teaching day at no extra cost to 4 p.m., the new regulation means an extension of working hours without pay. The teachers will have to continue to

prepare lessons, but these hours will no longer be paid.

As compensation for the new work burden, teachers have been offered a miserly salary increase of an average of just €64 (US\$83) per month. The sum itself is an insult bearing in mind that teachers have just lost four weeks' pay.

The unique positioning of the government comes as no surprise. A leaked document from the Finance Ministry a few weeks ago made clear that the government was the driving force behind the lockdown by the KL. The coalition government wanted to use the lockdown to enforce flexibility and the extension of working hours throughout the public service and the teachers were singled out as a test case.

Only after teachers refused to accept the KL diktat, even after four weeks of lockdown, did the government move in to enforce its "reforms" with a special law.

The collusion of the government and KL is a clear violation of contract bargaining practice, according to which the two negotiating parties are solely responsible for setting new working conditions and wages in Denmark. By breaking with this practice and imposing an historically unprecedented lockdown, the government has signaled its readiness to proceed against public employees and all other workers with the most aggressive methods.

Teachers have responded angrily to the actions of the government. Already on Thursday, when Thorning-Schmidt announced the special legislation for the first time, thousands of teachers gathered spontaneously in Copenhagen, Aarhus, Odense and other cities in protest.

Their protests, however, are being systematically sabotaged by the unions. The president of the teachers union, Anders Bondo Christensen, has already announced that his organization will not oppose the

new legislation and is prepared to enforce it in schools. “We are now faced with a school reform that had a bad start,” he said. “Now we have to get school life back to normal and create the best possible conditions for the education of our children.”

Although it was clear that the government wanted to set an example with the teachers, the country’s unions worked from the start to isolate the teachers. They prevented solidarity strikes and only organized token actions and “flash mobs”. From the beginning, they were part of the frame-up.

The same criteria apply to the Red-Green Unity List. Its spokesman, Per Clausen, complained on Thursday that the government was adopting “a tyrannical attitude” to teachers. But just days earlier he had advised teachers to make a fruitless appeal to the finance minister to negotiate a compromise.

The submissive attitude of the EL towards the government is bound up with its fundamental agreement with the government’s program. The Unity List has backed the social democratic minority coalition on a number of occasions, using its votes to ensure that the government had the necessary majority to enforce its austerity budgets.

The latest decision by the parliament and the preceding lockout are the prelude to an offensive by the financial elite against the entire public service and all Danish workers. In defense of their rights workers confront not only the government and the employers, but also the unions and the pseudo-left Unity List.

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