

Danish and Swedish governments step up attacks on refugees

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Denmark's right-wing Venstre (Liberal) Party government led by Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen initiated a debate on a bill in parliament last week on legislation permitting the country's border guards to seize money and personal belongings of refugees seeking asylum in the country.

According to the draft law, which is expected to win the support of the opposition Social Democrats, the far right Danish People's Party, and two smaller right-wing parties, money or valuables worth more than 10,000 kroner (€1,340) are to be confiscated from refugees entering the country. The only exception to this draconian measure, included only after a wave of outrage and protest from around the world, was for items of special emotional significance such as wedding or engagement rings.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has already noted, such proposals draw directly on the horrific traditions of the Nazi regime in Germany, which as part of its persecution of the Jewish population confiscated money and personal belongings in the lead up to and during the Holocaust.

The proposal is the headline measure in a broader immigration bill containing a range of discriminatory anti-refugee measures. Venstre is suggesting extending the wait to three years before refugees can bring their families to the country, a length of time which virtually no refugee is allowed to stay in Denmark after the previous government moved to expand the use of temporary residency permits for asylum seekers lasting just one year.

Other sections of the bill will tighten rules for foreigners seeking Danish citizenship, and shorten the length of time for temporary residence permits.

Even in light of the brutal measures adopted by governments across the continent to target refugees, Denmark has one of the strictest asylum regimes in Europe. During 2015, it accepted only 21,000 asylum seekers. Neighbouring Sweden, with a population less

than twice that of Denmark, took in nearly eight times as many refugees (163,000).

Members of the public who have sought to help refugees in their desperate plight have felt the full force of the state. A man was fined 5,000 kroner (€620) last week for picking up a family of refugees walking along a highway from northern Germany into Denmark. "I came home during the afternoon and saw on TV that refugees and migrants were walking up and down the motorway. I was particularly affected by seeing the many children," the man said during a court appearance.

Two other Danes who set up a humanitarian organisation to assist refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos were recently arrested and charged with people smuggling.

The entire political establishment bears responsibility for stoking a ferociously anti-immigrant climate over a period of more than a decade which has led to the latest reactionary crackdown. Rasmussen's Venstre Party emerged as the winner last June from possibly the most right-wing election campaign in the country's recent history.

Former Prime Minister and Social Democrat leader Helle Thorning-Schmidt spent the campaign boasting about how her government had tightened asylum laws for the first time in a decade and clamped down on refugee numbers. The Social Democrats campaigned on the slogan that everyone who came to Denmark had to work, a deliberate reference to claims made by far right propagandists that large numbers of refugees were living off Danish welfare payments.

This campaign played directly into the hands of the virulently anti-immigrant and far-right Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF), which was able to nearly double its representation in parliament and challenge Venstre as the largest right-wing party. Bowing to the hysteria DF whipped up during the election, Rasmussen

embraced the claim that Denmark was being overwhelmed by immigrants and tabled measures on taking power which slashed the amount of social welfare payments available to refugees.

Denmark's Nordic neighbours are implementing equally ruthless measures aimed at persecuting refugees seeking safety in the region.

At the beginning of January, Sweden's Social Democrat-led government instituted checks at crossings on the border with Denmark for the first time in almost fifty years. The move was aimed at preventing asylum-seekers from entering the country if they did not have the necessary papers. The government raised the prospect of passing legislation to close the Öresund Bridge connecting the two countries in a "crisis" situation, but this was later dropped. Immigration minister Morgan Johansson stated in mid-December, "We have hit our limit. Denmark has not."

The move prompted Copenhagen to implement similar procedures at its border with Germany. Rasmussen declared, "The new Swedish requirements entail a serious risk that a large number of illegal immigrants will be stranded in Copenhagen."

Reports indicated the border controls are having an impact farther afield. David Furtner, a spokesman for police in Upper Austria, said that 200 refugees have been turned away from the German border daily since the start of 2016, compared to just 60 per day in December. Officials in the Austrian state of Carinthia have sent 1,652 refugees back across the border to Slovenia since the start of January. Indicating that Vienna is considering turning away so-called economic migrants from its border, Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann told *Kronen-Zeitung*, "What is certain is that soon we are going to become more active at our borders."

Sweden's new controls will only force refugees to adopt even more desperate measures to enter the country, as shown by the detention of five asylum seekers trying to cross the Öresund Bridge between Denmark and Sweden on foot. They also will have a serious impact on commuters, over 20,000 of whom travel between Sweden and Denmark daily for work. Several hundred protesters demonstrating against the controls at Copenhagen airport clashed with police on January 10. The journey between Copenhagen and Malmö has been increased from around 40 minutes to well over an hour by the new checks.

The border controls come in the wake of a determined drive by the Social Democrat-Green Party coalition in Stockholm to beef up the country's refugee laws. Prime

Minister Stefan Löfven announced a cross-party deal in October with the right-wing opposition Moderates which removed the right of new asylum seekers to permanent residency permits. Asylum seekers from now on will only be granted temporary leave to remain in the country.

Notwithstanding the attempts by Swedish politicians to play up their image as offering a sanctuary for refugees, the reality is that the devastating impact of widespread privatisations and social spending cuts by successive governments have led to high levels of poverty and joblessness in major urban areas among immigrants. In some suburbs of major cities such as Stockholm and Malmö, unemployment is twice the national average. The social tensions this is producing exploded in the summer of 2014 when days of rioting broke out in the suburbs of Stockholm.

As in Denmark, the capitulation of the Social Democrats to the political right has strengthened extremist forces. The ultra-nationalist Sweden Democrats, closely aligned with France's National Front, obtained 18 percent support according to a recent poll conducted by the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*. Over the past year, at least two dozen arson attacks on refugee housing have been reported. After three buildings intended to house refugees were burnt down during one week in October, municipalities like Umeå in northern Sweden began keeping the location of refugee housing secret.

Anti-refugee agitation is being combined with a push for strengthening the military. Media reports claiming that the armed forces are facing a shortfall of personnel prompted the government to announce it was reconsidering bringing back military conscription for men and women. On January 10, Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom said she would welcome the reintroduction of military and civilian conscription to help tackle the influx of refugees. "Imagine if we had civilians in reserve this autumn and they could have been called on to reinforce the immigration agency," she said.

Under the guise of combatting "Russian aggression," Sweden and neighbouring states have stepped up military collaboration over recent years in line with the drive by US imperialism to isolate and encircle Moscow in Eastern Europe and the Baltic.



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