

50,000 people protest Danish government's planned scrapping of public holiday to pay for military spending increase

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An estimated 50,000 people joined a demonstration in Copenhagen Sunday against the Danish government's plan to scrap a public holiday to help fund increased military spending. The proposal emerged out of weeks of closed-door talks between the Social Democrats and their right-wing coalition partners and aims to help hike Danish military spending to 2 percent of GDP by 2030.

Social Democrat Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, together with her right-wing Liberal and Moderate party coalition partners, intend to scrap Store Bededag (Great Prayer Day) as a public holiday from 2024. The holiday has been recognised since the 17th century, when it was introduced following the Reformation to replace several holidays previously recognised by the Catholic Church. The holiday takes place on the fourth Friday after Easter.

The vast majority of those participating in Sunday's protest were much less concerned with the religious significance of the day than they were with the fact that they stand to lose a paid public holiday to fund the military and weapons of war. According to Danish public broadcaster DR, an educator who addressed the rally said, "We need time to process what we experience every single day, and we need time to recover physically and mentally, and we need time where we can focus on our families and ourselves."

A social and health care assistant added, "For too long we have put up with too much. All too often I see my colleagues being affected by stress, burnout, compassion fatigue due to a stressful day.

"That is why I'm standing here today, to demand my and my colleagues' right: the right to be human; we should have time to recover, recharge, and be able to pay our bills."

The Social Democrat-led government intends to enforce a huge hike in defence spending to reach 2 percent of the GDP by 2030. This is seen by the entire political establishment as essential to fund Denmark's role in the US-NATO war on Russia in Ukraine, and the expansion of NATO capabilities in the Nordic, Arctic, and Baltic regions.

The government has calculated that it can generate 3.2 billion kroner (about €430 million) through increased tax revenues and reduced subsidies by adding an extra workday each year. The government has offered to increase wages by 0.45 percent to compensate workers for the loss of a paid holiday. However, this increase will not apply to anyone on social welfare programs or pensions. The savings the government will make by freezing these transfer payments amid high inflation amount to 700 million kroner of the 3.2 billion kroner that will be redirected to the military.

Sunday's demonstration was called by the Danish Trade Union Confederation following a series of smaller local protests over recent weeks. Recognising the strength of public opposition to the government's plan, most opposition parties have also come out against it. However, they all support the military spending increase, and are merely urging the government to find less provocative ways to make social spending cuts to fund it. For their part, the unions have close ties to the Social Democrats, who have made a major contribution to the rightward lurch of official Danish politics over recent years. In power since 2019, they have adopted the far right's racist immigrant policy, expanded military spending, and provided weapons to Ukraine.

Eight opposition parties, ranging from the far-right Danish People's Party and New Right to the pseudo-left Red-Green Alliance/Unity List (RGA) and Socialist People's Party, issued a statement opposing the abolition of the public holiday.

Socialist People's Party leader Pia Olsen Dyhr appealed to the government to enter "tripartite talks" with the unions and employers' groups to agree on an increase of working hours throughout the year so that the public holiday could be retained. She also called for the decision on scrapping the public holiday to be postponed until after the next election, pointing to the fact that none of the parties in government campaigned in support of the move. Olsen Dyhr's position was backed by former Liberal Prime Minister and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

The fact that all the opposition parties back the government's attacks on social spending and workers' rights to expand the defence budget is underscored by their unanimous backing for the war in Ukraine. Last march, when Frederiksen was leading a Social Democrat minority government backed by the RGA and Socialist People's Party, she negotiated a plan to increase defence spending to 2 percent of GDP by 2033. The agreement, supported by the Socialist People's Party, Liberals, and Conservatives, also committed to holding a referendum to abolish Denmark's opt-out from the European Union's defence policy. Although the RGA formally opposed the March agreement, it was only thanks to its sustained parliamentary support for the Social Democrats since 2019 that Frederiksen was in power to negotiate it. At its party conference in May, the RGA agreed to drop its firm opposition to Danish NATO membership to underscore the party's support for the imperialist war on Russia.

After Frederiksen's Social Democrats emerged from the 1 November general election as the largest party, she negotiated with the Liberals and Moderates a shorter timetable for the military spending increase. When the Social Democrat/Liberal/Moderate coalition programme was unveiled on December 14, it contained the commitment to reach the 2 percent defence spending goal by 2030, and specified the abolition of the Store Bededag public holiday as the means by which three years could be cut from the original timetable. The coalition agreement, the first between

parties from Denmark's traditional "left" and "right" blocs in over four decades, also included a major income tax cut for high earners and plans to restructure the health care system to expand the role of private providers.

The emergence of mass popular opposition in Denmark to the ruling class's subordination of all areas of social life to militarism coincides with an upsurge of workers' struggles across Europe against the drive to make them pay for imperialist wars. In France, millions of workers are expected to participate Tuesday in nationwide protests against President Emmanuel Macron's assault on pensions, which is aimed at slashing public spending on the elderly to fund an increase in French military spending. In Britain, strikes by National Health Service workers, rail workers, and teachers are resisting real-terms wage cuts, public spending austerity, and privatisation by a Conservative government determined to sharply increase defence spending.

Workers in Denmark opposed to footing the bill for the reckless US/NATO war on Russia should link their struggle with those of their fellow workers across Europe and internationally to build a global anti-war movement. The rally held Saturday by the Socialist Equality Party in Berlin demonstrated that the only way to stop the war and the social attacks that accompany it in every country is through the fight for a socialist and internationalist programme to put an end to war and the capitalist profit system that gives rise to it.



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