

Danish parliament votes to abolish public holiday in order to finance military spending increase

Jordan Shilton
8 March 2023

Denmark's coalition government of the Social Democrats and two right-wing parties rammed a proposal through parliament last week to abolish a public holiday so as to secure additional funding for the country's armed forces. The campaign to scrap the public holiday has gone hand-in-hand with a massive propaganda campaign to portray Denmark as under immediate threat from a Russian attack and therefore forced to arm itself to the teeth.

Prime Minister and Social Democrat leader Mette Frederiksen repeatedly declared in the lead-up to the vote that the decision to abolish great prayer day (store bededag), which has been a public holiday in Denmark since the 17th century, was necessary due to "war in Europe." Speaking after the parliamentary vote, she declared that the decision was appropriate given the "security policy situation," and would allow the government to spend more on defence.

The proposal was introduced last December in the coalition agreement for the current Social Democrat/Liberal/Moderate government. Negotiations on the agreement lasted for well over a month following the November 1 general election and resulted in the first coalition government between parties from the traditional "left" and "right" blocs in over four decades. While the Social Democrats have long led the "left" or red bloc, the Liberals are Denmark's largest right-wing party. The Moderates are a new creation of former Liberal Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen, a close ally of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who supported the war in Iraq and went on to become NATO secretary-general with backing from the United States.

The government claims it can save 3.2 billion kroner (about €400 million) by adding a day to the working year. Some 700 million kroner of this total will be raised by annulling an automatic increase in state benefits in 2026, rather than increasing them in line with the 0.45 percent pay rise workers will receive to compensate for having to work an extra day. This freeze will hit pensioners and students,

among others. The money is intended to help the government reach the NATO target of spending 2 percent of GDP by 2030, three years ahead of the timetable agreed by the Social Democrat minority government and several opposition parties immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The move remains deeply unpopular and was never raised during last year's election campaign. On 5 February of this year, a demonstration of 50,000 people in Copenhagen, the largest demonstration in the capital in over a decade, organised by the main trade union federation FH, protested the abolition of the public holiday. The sentiment dominating the demonstration was that workloads in the public sector were already so great following decades of austerity that the loss of a holiday was intolerable.

During the intervening month, a systematic effort to whip up militarism and portray Denmark as a frontline state under immediate threat of attack has been under way. On 15 February, the Danish government announced it would participate in the European Sky Shield Initiative, a German-led plan for continent-wide air defence systems. While initial focus will be on short- and medium-range surface-to-air missiles, reports noted that ballistic capabilities could be added in the future, i.e., the capability to fight wars with nuclear weapons.

Over the weekend, public broadcaster DR carried a prominent report on a military exercise by the Home Guard, a division of the armed forces consisting primarily of volunteers, on the island of Bornholm, in preparation for a Russian invasion. Bornholm lies in the Baltic Sea and is Denmark's most easterly point. The as yet unexplained destruction of the Nord Stream pipeline, which veteran journalist Seymour Hersh exposed as a US-led operation, took place a few kilometers off the Bornholm coast.

The Royal Danish Air Force is currently involved in joint exercises with the US. The manoeuvres, scheduled to run from 6 to 16 March, involve Lockheed Martin's F-35 fighter

jet, which is due to replace Denmark's fleet of F-16s in stages over the next three years. Lars Loekke Rasmussen's Liberal government agreed to the purchase of 27 F-35s in 2016 at an estimated cost of €2.8 billion, making it the largest single defence purchase in Denmark's history.

Denmark currently spends around 1.4 percent of its GDP on defence. To hit the 2030 target, defence spending will need to grow by close to 50 percent, when economic growth is taken into account. To fund this major hike, the government is planning a comprehensive attack on public spending and moves to increase labour productivity.

Two days after last Tuesday's parliamentary vote to abolish the public holiday, the government tabled a plan to reform master's degree programmes at Denmark's universities. The reform will see half of all master's degrees cut from two years to one, with most of those impacted expected to be in the social sciences and humanities. A heavier focus will be placed on vocational degrees and other forms of training. One of the goals of the reform is to increase overall labour market participation by 6,000 workers.

There is no principled opposition to the undermining of workers' social and democratic rights to pay for the militarisation of society. Several parties voted against the proposal to scrap store bededag in parliament and backed the protests, including on the "left" the Socialist People's Party and the Red-Green Alliance, and, on the right, the Conservatives and Liberal Alliance, the far-right Danish People's Party and Denmark Democrats, and the New Right. But they have all endorsed in one way or another increased military spending and back the US-led war on Russia.

The Socialist People's Party (SF) supported the initial defence agreement from March 2022 that committed Denmark to reaching the 2 percent target for defence spending by 2033. Frederiksen's minority Social Democrat government was only in a position to lead the talks on that deal because SF and the Red-Green Alliance (RGA), known as the Unity List in Danish, secured a parliamentary majority for the Social Democrats between 2019 and 2022. The RGA is Denmark's principle pseudo-left party, including among its members the Pabloite Socialist Workers Party. At its latest congress in May 2022, the RGA abandoned its call for a withdrawal from NATO.

As for the right-wing and far-right parties, their main criticism was that the abolition of store bededag was an attack on the church and on "Danish tradition," and that savings should be found elsewhere to finance the military spending increase.

Recent events in Denmark are part of a more general trend across Europe. In neighbouring Sweden, the right-wing

government, which relies on support from the fascistic Sweden Democrats to remain in power, is implementing a 64 percent hike in defence spending by 2028, which will be funded through attacks on public services and social spending. In France, mass protests have developed against President Emmanuel Macron's drive to undermine workers' pension rights so as to help fund a massive €400 billion investment in the military. In Germany, the Social Democratic-led government introduced the Bundeswehr (armed forces) special fund of €100 billion and is now preparing the way for even higher defence spending increases. Meanwhile, it slashed the health care budget by two-thirds in a single year and is in the process of imposing a below-inflation pay agreement on public-sector workers.

As the European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International explained in a February 2023 statement titled "The mass strike movement, war and the revolutionary crisis in Europe:"

[O]pposition to war is becoming a decisive factor in social and political protests and an open political confrontation between the capitalists and the workers... Explosive social anger is fueling the continent-wide strike movement of the working class that is an advanced expression of an emerging global eruption of the class struggle. The decisive question is to develop in the working class the consciousness that its struggles against the employers and the national governments are part of an objectively united, international offensive of the working class against capitalism.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact