Thousands of young people protest in Denmark against cuts to student assistance and welfare

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Around 10,000 school students joined a protest march in Copenhagen on November 4 against the Social Democrat-led coalition government's plans to cut student grants (SU) and restrict access to unemployment insurance for graduates. Thousands more protested across the country, with reports indicating that at least 30,000 students did not attend school.

The protest was triggered by a government proposal to remove SU from 81,000 young people currently studying or in training and living with their parents. It would remove SU entirely from students whose parents have a combined annual income of more than 710,000 kroner (about €95,000) and cut by more than half the amount paid to students whose parents earn between 420,000 kroner and 710,000 kroner. The current SU rate for a student living with their parents is about 1,150 kroner (€154) per month.

The measure is part of a broader austerity programme by the coalition government to fund a massive increase in military spending and tax cuts for big business. Older workers will find it harder in future to access the Seniors' Pension, a benefit that has allowed workers to reduce their working hours prior to reaching the official retirement age.

A restriction on access to unemployment insurance would prevent graduates from receiving the benefit unless they had maintained paid employment for at least four hours per week over an 18-month period. Protesting students denounced this move, stressing that their studies or professional training programmes are themselves full-time jobs.

Denmark is pledged to hike military spending to 3.5 percent of GDP by 2033, part of its commitment to reach a NATO target of spending 5 percent of economic output on war and related infrastructure. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen heads a four-party coalition of her Social Democrats, the Moderates, Social Liberals, and Socialist People's Party (SF).

The government's budget sets aside 6.4 billion kroner to reduce corporation tax from 22 percent to 19 percent. Additionally, the government has announced income tax cuts that will predominantly benefit high earners, including removal of the top income tax rate.

Training and Research Minister Christina Egelund (Moderates) told Danish public broadcaster TV2 that she could not rule out further cuts to SU during the government's term, which runs until 2030. Asked if cuts to SU for students no longer living at home were possible, she replied, "I cannot say; after all, we are living in extremely volatile and uncertain times."

The Danish ruling class's chief concern is to free up resources to contribute to the escalating war against Russia in Ukraine and the militarisation of the Arctic. Foreign Minister and Moderates leader Lars Løkke Rasmussen announced Tuesday more than €640 million of additional military assistance to Ukraine to coincide with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to Copenhagen for talks with Nordic heads of government.

The entire political establishment in Copenhagen has rallied around the European imperialist powers' trillion-euro rearmament programme under conditions of US President Donald Trump's repeated threats to militarily seize Greenland, a Danish autonomous territory. Although an agreement between Washington and Copenhagen was unveiled earlier this autumn to facilitate the establishment of two US military bases on the island, transatlantic conflicts over the energy-rich and economically and strategically important Arctic region remain. Denmark is investing billions to expand its Arctic and North Atlantic military presence, and has helped lay the groundwork for Germany, France, and Britain to expand their presence in the high north by supporting NATO's Arctic Sentry exercise.

The European imperialists' militarist agenda has been accompanied on the domestic front by austerity, which is provoking widespread opposition. Student protests in Denmark have followed ongoing mass protests in France against a crumbling public education system and impossible living costs. Major protests and one-day strikes have also taken place in Spain, Italy, Belgium, Greece, and Germany, with many more planned throughout November.

Media coverage of the protests in Denmark has sought to deny their link to the movement in other countries. TV2 journalists questioned whether Danish students were in fact privileged, since the conditions that drove French youth to demonstrate were much worse than what the government in Copenhagen is seeking to impose.

But the concessions secured by the working class in Denmark and the other Nordic countries in an earlier historical period have been systematically dismantled over recent decades. The income of the top 1 percent of earners rose 54 percent since 2014, compared to just 9 percent for average Danes, according to a

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report by the AE think tank. In 2024, the top 1 percent had a higher income than in 2021, while everyone else saw their income drop in real terms by over 5 percent due to inflation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US/NATO war on Russia in Ukraine.

The student protests have increased tensions within the governing coalition and exposed the SF's claims to be a "left" alternative to the establishment. SF leader Pia Olsen Dyhr has previously declared that SU was a "core value of Denmark's welfare system." Trying to justify her party's 180-degree turn, she claimed the measure was "not something we came up with," before adding that she had "entered a compromise" with other governing parties.

SF participated in a Social Democrat-led government between 2011 and 2014, helping impose sweeping austerity measures after the 2008 global economic crisis before leaving the coalition amid mounting popular opposition. The party's roots trace back to a right-wing split from the Stalinist Danish Communist Party after the Soviet bureaucracy violently suppressed the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. Aksel Larsen, the party's founder, claimed it was possible to develop an independent line without being subordinate to Moscow or the imperialist powers led by the United States during the Cold War. Within a decade of its formation, SF began propping up a government led by the Social Democrats, among Denmark's most pro-NATO parties.

Since the four-party coalition government lacks a parliamentary majority, it must secure the support of two smaller parties for its draft budget to implement the SU cuts. One of these is the Red-Green Alliance (RGA, known as the Unity List in Danish), which postures as further to the "left" than SF. The Socialist Workers Party, the Danish section of the Pabloite United Secretariat, is a faction within the RGA. Michel Pablo broke from the Trotskyist movement in 1953 based on his explicit repudiation of the working class as a revolutionary force, and the belief that factions of the Stalinist bureaucracy, bourgeois-nationalist movements, and sections of the trade union and social democratic apparatuses could lead revolutionary struggles.

Summing up the decades of opportunist politics it has pursued, the RGA asserted—after agreeing to hand Frederiksen a majority so she could become prime minister following this spring's parliamentary elections—that it would not vote in favour of her government's tax cuts for corporations and the rich. It did so knowing that Frederiksen, safely in power thanks to its votes, would be assured of votes from the right-wing parties on these issues.

The budget is scheduled for a vote in parliament on December 9 and 10, and it remains unclear whether the RGA will support it or whether the government will reach out to the right-wing opposition parties. RGA finance policy spokesperson Victoria Velasquez commented to TV2, "We have an agreement in advance that, with all of the tax cuts they want to make, they will have to find another majority. But there are several other areas of the draft that we hope will be taken off the table entirely. We don't want to go along with restricting access to unemployment, cutting SU, or restricting access to the Seniors' Pension."

The SAP put out a statement on November 1, "Welfare before weapons", with the Stalinist Danish Communist Party (DKP), the Socialist Youth Front (SUF)—that broke from the RGA in 2025 over the RGA's abandonment of its previous opposition to Danish NATO membership—and the Communist Party, established in 2006 by various Maoist organisations. While denouncing the "totally absurd amount of money" the Social Democrat-led government plans to spend on war, it made no mention of the RGA's key part in enabling this government to take office.

While criticising the direction of billions to arms companies and the Danish government's support for Israel's genocide of the Palestinians, the statement remained silent on Denmark's role in escalating the war on Russia, because the vast majority of the Danish "left," including the Pabloite SAP, has embraced the US/NATO pro-war propaganda. No young person reading this statement would know that the RGA is negotiating with the government over the price of its support for its budget of austerity and rearmament.

The task facing young people in Denmark and throughout Europe being drawn into struggle against the ruling elites' agenda of imperialist war and capitalist austerity is to fight for the independent political mobilisation of the working class on an internationalist and socialist programme. This requires a settling of accounts with the pseudo-left organisations who have for decades exploited left-wing and even "revolutionary" rhetoric to legitimise their political support for right-wing Social Democrat governments and opportunist alliances like the RGA aimed at smothering the class struggle.

Workers and young people must build rank-and-file committees in the workplaces and neighbourhoods to take control of organising opposition to austerity and war out of the hands of the union bureaucracies and "left" political parties. Workers in Denmark should link their struggles with their counterparts throughout Europe and internationally, who are being drawn into the same fight against imperialist war and capitalist barbarism.



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