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New Parties of the Left

# The Red-Green Alliance in Denmark

Experiences from Europe

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## Introduction: the present challenge of the Red-Green Alliance

In the coming years The Red-Green Alliance (RGA) of Denmark faces challenges, opportunities and risks that probably are bigger than at any other time since its foundation in 1989. The next elections can be called by the prime minister at any time, but no later than November 2011. According to opinion polls over the last almost two years to January 2011, the present government of the two main bourgeois parties will lose its majority. This will make possible the establishment of a government of two reformist workers parties, needing the support from the RGA and/or a small centre bourgeois party in order to have a majority.

The new situation in parliament, combined with economic crisis, may open a period of increased social and political struggles and political radicalisation. But at the same time the RGA will come under the influence of reformist and populist pressure, externally and internally.

The RGA was probably the first broad and pluralist anticapitalist party in Europe to develop out of the changed political landscape after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It arose organically out of the left wing of the Danish labour movement, merging several established left parties. It has had representation in parliament since 1994.

To understand the nature of the RGA, its development, its positions and the challenges it faces

today, it is necessary to make a brief sketch of the Danish labour movement and the Danish left.

## **Social democracy**

The Danish Social Democratic Party traces its history back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century European labour movement, having been part of both the First and the Second International. Its close links to the trade union movement, its reformism and its bureaucratization more or less follows the path of the rest of European social democracy.

Danish social democracy first came into government in the late 1920s and 1930s as part of an alliance with a centre bourgeois party, based on small farmers and city intellectuals, implementing social reform, but always seeking acceptance and alliance with big agriculture and industry.

After World War II, the party was the backbone of building the so called Welfare State, still based on class collaboration and a compromise with the main bourgeois parties and organisations of industry.

During the economic crisis of the 70s the space for class compromise narrowed, and faced with problems of state finances, balance of payment, unemployment and a rising left wing in the trade unions and on the political scene, a Social Democrat-led government gave up power voluntarily in 1982.

Since then, like many other European Social Democratic Parties, the Danish party has developed in a social-liberal direction – outside government (1982–1993; 2001–2011) and as the leading governmental party (1993–2001). Its share of the votes, its standing in opinion polls, and its membership, has all decreased and fierce power struggles have taken place.

## **Trade Union Movement**

The development of the Danish trade union movement has been parallel to that of social democracy, the two regarding themselves as being parts of the same movement. In Denmark the trade union movement has always been unitary. Since the 1950s the percentage of organisation has been very high: close to 100% in industry, less in public jobs and service. The official or unofficial closed shop is normal. During the last two or three decades, union membership has declined, though not as dramatically as in many other European countries.

From time to time, left forces have gained influence at shop steward and branch level. But apart from the CP leadership of the sailors union for a couple of decades and the nursery school teachers union for a brief period, the Social Democratic Party has been hegemonic at the national federation level and in the two confederations LO and FTF. At the moment only the national union of public employees is not headed by a Social Democrat.

## **The political left**

The Danish Communist Party came out of the historical split in the international workers movement and became Danish section of the Third International. Politically it followed the Moscow party line all the way to the end. It had some influence in the trade union movement in the 1930s, especially among unemployed workers. At that time it gained a small representation in Parliament through proportional representation.

It grew during and after World War II because of its involvement in the underground armed liberation movement against German occupation. For ten years, after the World War, it held on to its positions both in parliament and in trade unions. But after supporting the Soviet occupation of Hungary in 1956, it experienced a serious setback and a split.

Its influence grew again from the beginning of the 70s as part of the overall political radicalization of the period. It gained important influence in the movement against Danish membership of EU, the peace movement, the trade union youth movement and the student movement. At that time it regained parliamentary representation.

The CP almost collapsed with the breakdown of the Soviet Union, both for political and financial reasons, and has split into several small factions. As a result of the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the secret Khrushchev speech in 1956, a split in the CP headed by the then chairman occurred leading to the establishment of the Socialist Peoples' Party. The party distanced itself from Moscow, and it positioned itself close to, but still to the left of the Social Democratic Party. A part of the trade union activist base of the CP followed the chairman into the Socialist People's Party, but the party focused almost all its activities on parliamentary work.

In the first election after its establishment (1960), the Socialist People's Party won 11 Members of Parliament (MPs) (6% of national vote). Its number of MPs has since fluctuated, peaking in 1987 with 27 MPs (15%). In two periods in the 60s and the 70s, the party was part of the parliamentary majority supporting Social Democratic-led governments, but never in government itself. From the late 1987 until 2007, the representation in parliament of Socialist People's Party gradually declined.

The radicalisation of the 1960s also led to the establishment of the Left Socialist Party, born as a split of the Socialist People's Party's in 1967. The split was triggered by the Socialist People's Party participation in anti-worker legislation. From the beginning the Left Socialist Party was a mixture of all elements of the New Left: hippies, anarchists, Maoists, Trotskyists, other self-declared Leninists, anti-imperialists and many other shades of anti-establishment opposition.

Through most of its existence the Left Socialist Party has had a small parliamentary representation (between two and four percent) until 1987. This representation gave the party a special position on the far left in relation to other groups that either stayed outside or left the Party at different times. Among these were several Maoist groups, several non-Trotskyist, Leninist groups and the Danish section of the Fourth International.

There have always existed one or more Trotskyist groups in Denmark since the 1930s. They have done important political work, especially international solidarity, but never had any real influence in the Danish labour movement. After World War II the Danish section of the Fourth International experienced a period of splits. Some opted for entryism in social democracy, others in the CP. But most of them took part in the establishment of the Socialist People's Party in 1958.

As in many other European countries the Fourth Internationalists grew as a result of the radicalization of the 1960s.

They took part in the Socialist People's Party split which established the Left Socialist Party. At the beginning of the 1970s the majority of the Fourth International section left the Left Socialist Party and established its own organisation, which experienced some growth until the mid-1980s. In 1980 it changed its name to the Socialist Workers Party (SAP) and started publishing a weekly paper. It turned its political and organisational focus to industry and the trade unions and collected enough signatures (around 20,000 – out of a population of about 5.1 million) to be able to run national lists for the parliamentary election three times in 80s – all on the basis of a membership of no more than 200. The election results were very modest, around 2,000 votes.

The Red-Green Alliance was established in 1989 on the basis of a written agreement between the CP, Left Socialist Party and SAP – and was soon joined by the remaining fragments of the Maoist Communist Workers Party (KAP).

## **The social struggles and movements of the late 1970s and 1980s**

Established in 1989 the RGA was also a product of the social struggles and movements of the late 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s – or more precisely a product of the decline of these movements. Grassroots and left activity in the trade union movement grew in these years, sometimes threatening Social Democratic hegemony. Members of left parties and groups built support committees for wildcat strikes and organised left-wing oppositions in trade unions. It never became a unitary left wing, since the strongest left wing force, the CP was keen not to clash fundamentally with the Social Democratic union leadership.

The highpoint of working class struggle was the strike movement of 1985 against the new union contract and against the government which came close to a general strike and almost forced a government, composed of two bourgeois parties, out of office. The strike movement was led by left wing forces together with oppositional Social Democratic Party trade unionists and it actually bypassed the national trade union leadership.

The strike movement neither succeeded in reducing working week, as was its official aim, nor in ousting the government, but it did put a brake on the neoliberal and anti-union offensive of the Danish ruling class. It prevented the ruling class from inflicting defeats on the working class the way they did in the UK and USA.

In the period from 1967 to 1989, several important grassroots and extra-parliamentary movements developed in Denmark. Some of them, consisting of several hundreds of local committees, were supported by important parts of the trade union movement and mobilised up to 100,000 in demonstrations. These movements were a result of, and gave impetus to, political radicalisation. The most important of them were:

- The anti-Vietnam War movement and other anti imperialist movements, primarily among the youth,
- The movement against the introduction of nuclear power plants in Denmark which was a 100 percent successful,
- The movement against the EU, mostly focusing on the succeeding new treaties put up for referendums and on elections to European Parliament. This Danish anti-EU sentiment was – until the mid 90s – represented almost exclusively by left parties and individuals, though with some nationalist tendencies,
- The peace movement which for several years focused on preventing a NATO-plan for new nuclear warheads in Europe and on forcing the government to implement official Danish policy of no nuclear weapons on Danish soil in peace time.

The movement forced the government to insist on Danish minority statements in all NATO decisions on nuclear armament for several years, • The various movements of students against cuts and for democratisation of universities and colleges.

## **The decline of the late 1980s**

At the end of the 1980s these movements declined. The left wing was not able to recover its position in the trade union movement after the apparent defeat of the strike movement of 1985. The neo-liberal offensive was weaker and later than that in the UK and the USA, but nevertheless it took its

toll and had its effect. This created a mood on the left that “forces of resistance” had to stick together. And, of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union bloc hit not only the CP, but also the non-Stalinist left wing constituency. In this way Denmark did not differ from many other countries of Europe.

In the general election in 1987 the Left Socialist Party failed to pass the 2% threshold and lost its parliamentary representation. It stood in one more election in 1988 with even worse result. The CP had lost representation earlier, and neither SAP nor KAP came near to the threshold. For one brief election period a populist split from the CP was represented in parliament.

For the first time in decades, no party to the left of the Socialist People’s Party was represented in Parliament. In a few municipalities common left slates were established. Already before the 1988 national elections informal contacts had been made between individual leaders of the CP, the Left Socialist Party and SAP. The latter two made an electoral agreement allowing SAP candidates on the Left Socialist slate. On election night both representatives of SAP and of the Left Socialist Party introduced the idea of some kind of national electoral collaboration between the three parties.

The basic motivation, of course, was the need of a nonreformist representation to the left of the Socialist People’s Party in parliament. At the same time, a maturity had developed in sections of the three parties which wanted to end decades of political infighting on the left.

The CP was also undergoing a decline and fragmentation under the influence of Perestroika in Soviet Union, with people and groupings developing in all kinds of directions.

In the SAP, individual leaders were influenced by the discussions on party building and left alliances taking place within the Fourth International, especially at the IIRE-school in Amsterdam.

## **The Red-Green Alliance established**

Negotiations took place over a long period. There was a deep mistrust in the membership of all three parties towards the other parties.

Important political differences existed, especially between SAP/the Left Socialist Party on the one side, and the CP on the other.

Organisationally, the SAP and the CP tended to side together against the deep rooted anti-Leninism in the Left Socialist Party.

Complicating the process was the fragmentation of the CP. One group was rapidly moving to the right, either to social democracy or into business careers. A major group opted for a much broader unity; some kind of peoples’ front on an ill-defined platform and with very vague ideas of its components. Another major current wanted to stick with classical Stalinism.

Another issue was the difference of size. The CP had about 4,000 members, Left Socialist Party between 500 and 600 and the SAP not much more than 100, but with a much higher level of activity.

Should this be reflected in influence on the political program and in the leadership? In the pre-foundation negotiations an understanding was developed that all three parties were needed for a balanced alliance.

In reality the issue was settled at a time when the negotiations were in a stalemate because of the factional struggles in the CP. To speed up the process and to put pressure on the CP, the Left

Socialist Party and SAP started to prepare to stand in the next elections. This initiative was legitimised by an endorsement from the CP-chairman, though no formal decision in the party had been taken.

According to Danish election law, a party not already represented in parliament must collect around 20,000 verified signatures in support of their participation, to be allowed to stand in national elections. Practically you need 25,000, because many are not valid.

Left Socialist Party and SAP set a target of 10,000 signatures each, while expecting 5,000 from members of the CP and non-aligned activists. For a party of 100 activists it was a huge target, but with the past experience of successful campaigns of to collect 25,000 signatures three times during the 80s, SAP reached its target before the Left Socialist Party – and established itself in that way as an equal partner in the collaboration.

Finally in 1989 an agreement was established between the parties. At that time supporters of the project had won a majority in the CP, though some of them still had the goal of changing it to a much broader alliance on a less developed and not so leftist political platform. A minority left to establish a new but much smaller traditional Stalinist Communist Party.

In December 1989 a founding National Conference was held to declare the establishment of a new organisation which was to be an alliance and not a party.

The conference adopted a preliminary political platform and a set of organisational rules. A national leadership was appointed by 54 New Parties of the Left each of the three parties and some individuals – but each of the parties could veto any decision.

The name Enhedslisten was chosen. Directly translated it means Unity Slate, stressing the common understanding of the alliance as a corporation for election purposes, while the founding parties continued their separate existence as fractions of the alliance, each with a public face and public activities. Some members preferred the name Red-Green Alliance (RGA). It was incorporated as a “second” name, and soon it was decided to use that outside Denmark, because of the very Danish character of the real name.

The incorporation of “Green” in the party name illustrated that no green party was ever able to establish itself in Denmark. This was partly because the socialist left wing at an early stage manifested itself with a green agenda, beginning with the campaign against nuclear power.

In the next two national conferences the political platform and the organisational rules were developed. The now very small Maoist KAP joined, and the proportion of non-party affiliated members grew, leading to a cancellation of all formal special rights of the founding parties.

Important parts of the political platform which was developed during pre-foundation negotiations and during the first couple of years were: .

- To the left of the Socialist People’s Party
- Anticapitalist and socialist .
- In favour of democratic rights and with an explicit distancing from “experiences of the Soviet bloc” (reflecting real political developments in parts of the CP) .
- Focusing on parliamentary activities, but promoting extraparlimentary mobilisations

- Anti-European Union .
- Ecological .
- Pro-trade union .

The RGA adopted a principle for parliamentary work that originated from the Left Socialist Party which consists of guiding rules for MPs and local councillors. They are expected to: .

- Vote for any law or law amendment if it is even a slight improvement (against sectarianism and ultimatism) .
- Vote against any law or change of law if it contains any cutback or set-back in relation to our political platform (against pragmatism and usual parliamentary behaviour of reformist parties) .
- Vote therefore against parliamentary deals or horse-trading of packages of law amendments, where all participating parties get a little in their favour in exchange for supporting elements, they don't like (this is a integral part of Danish parliamentary life because of proportional representation, with many parties and none having a majority by itself).

Again in 1990 national elections were called, and for the first time the RGA stood on its own slate. The campaign was not very well prepared: the election manifesto was marked by many compromises, and the majority of the top candidates were "famous" leftist individuals outside the three parties, not all of them very familiar with the RGA-platform and the election manifesto.

The RGA received 1.7% of the votes, below the 2% threshold, and thus won no representation in parliament. Shortly afterwards the ex-CP chairman and a group around him left the RGA and joined the Socialist People's Party, where today he is the Number Two Man! There was then a period of almost four years until the next election which helped the RGA to mature politically and organisationally. The disappearance of the most right wing CP-group helped in this process. Mutual mistrust diminished, collective experience of political campaigning was gained and a limited political platform on different issues was developed.

Gradually more and more individual members joined the RGA.

It changed from collaboration between three parties to a membership organisation. But the notion of an electoral bloc still existed, mostly in the CP, but also in SAP and less so in the Left Socialist Party. All three parties kept their own organisational structure with offices, meetings and publications though KAP quickly dissolved as did the Left Socialist Party some years later.

The question of the European Community/European Union has been a major issue in Denmark since 1972 when a majority in a referendum voted to join. Most other new treaties have been put up for a referendum. Resistance to the EU has been an issue which is popular, working class and of the left. Even social democracy was strongly divided at one point, and they campaigned for a rejection of the Single Market in 1984.

In 1992 a majority voted against the Maastricht Treaty, creating political chaos in Denmark and to some extent in the EU. But soon afterwards a broad group of political parties, including the Socialist People's Party, made a so called "national compromise" leading to the Edinburgh agreement and a new referendum in 1993 incorporating four opt-outs for Denmark in the treaty.

To many members and voters of the Socialist People's Party this was seen as treason, while the RGA was the only left party 56 New Parties of the Left campaigning for a "No" in the second referendum

on the Maastricht Treaty which included the Edinburgh agreement.

This was probably the most important single factor behind the 1994 election result of the RGA. Not only did the RGA pass the threshold, but it obtained 3.1% of the votes securing the election of 6 MPs. The group was composed of two members of the Left Socialist Party, two members of the CP, one member of the SAP and one exmember of the KAP.

In many ways this was the second birth of the RGA.

### **Parliamentary watchdog**

Since 1994 the RGA has been represented in parliament, shifting from 6 to 5 to 4 to 6 and then again 4 MPs. Until around 2006-7 this was a period with a modest level of class struggle and social and political movements. Of course this has put its mark on the RGA.

In its written programs and manifestos and whenever asked, the RGA states that it is an extra-parliamentary party supporting the social movements. But in reality the focus has been on parliamentary work, locally and nationally. Though many RGA-members have been active in trade unions, students organisations, tenants organisations, environmental campaigns and social movements, until recently organising the activity of the members in this field has not been regarded as an issue for the RGA-organisation.

RGA has been a radical parliamentary opposition - with some influence from 1994 to 2001 when the Social Democratic party was leading governments. Its brand image has been that of the critical watchdog, getting media coverage for its well-researched single issue campaigns, exposures of big capital, ministers and high-ranking civil servants and the only major party in Denmark with a loosely defined ideal of socialism. Most outstanding have been the campaigns against tax evasion by big multinational corporations.

Politically, the focus has been on the poorest and most marginalised groups in society like immigrants, refugees and people on social benefit and minority groups including youth subcultures and LBGT's. Less importance has been given to the traditional working class. Also ecological issues have had a high priority. In the 1990s the RGA called for laws favouring and supporting organic production in agriculture. Support for organic production has since been adopted by most of the mainstream parties, but only the RGA is in favour of 100 % organic agriculture.

Membership has steadily increased from a little more than a thousand members, when the RGA had its first parliamentary representation, to more than 5,500 members in January 2011.

Typically membership increased during and immediately after election campaigns illustrating that it is the work of the MPs that attract more members rather than militant activity. A large part of the membership joined to show their support for the parliamentary group in a more visible and material form than just voting, but does not participate in local meetings or other forms of activity.

After several years of preparation in successive working groups, the RGA in 2003 adopted a formal political programme which is both anticapitalist and socialist. It stresses the need to mobilise the working class and allies to overthrow capitalist society. It even mentions the role of independent working class organisation and dual power organs in the revolutionary process and in the socialist society; plus clear cut internationalism.

The programme may have served as a point of reference for leading layers of the party, but it never



played any big role in the political life of the RGA. Only a small minority of the membership has read it, and no organised education in the programme takes place in the party.

A large part of the activists and of the leadership will not agree with the most explicit revolutionary elements of the programme of the RGA. One example is a newspaper interview in May 2010 with an MP who is a young woman and the prime political spokesperson of the RGA. When confronted with quotes from the programme, she honestly defended most of it, but when it came to dual power organs she called it “outdated language”.

## **A democratic and egalitarian culture - with some problems**

The internal life of the RGA has for better or worse been marked by the heritage of the left of the 1970s and 1980s with two important elements:

- The RGA is extremely democratic and egalitarian,
- There is no tradition for open confrontation of different strategic perspectives.

An internal democratic life was important for both Left Socialist Party and SAP, but also for the CP-group that entered the RGA as a reaction to their experience with bureaucratic centralism in the CP.

All issues are decided by the elected delegates at the annual National Conference. Written discussion is open to all members. All individual members can present a proposal for the National Conference and all members can speak at the conference, even if they are not elected delegates.

58 New Parties of the Left According to party statutes minorities can withdraw from the general election of the 25 members of the National Leadership and obtain the right to elect their own members proportionally, if they obtain at least four percent of delegates.

Before each National Conference a membership referendum is organised to establish which candidate the members want to head up the election lists. On the basis of the referendum one or more slates, distributing candidates in different constituencies, are presented to the National Conference, which then vote on these slates. In the Danish election system a small party can predict with a high level of certainty who will be elected if it is up to 10 MPs.

It has never been challenged that the elected National Leadership is “above” the RGA’s parliamentary group. The MPs must follow the general political line of the National Conference and of the National Leadership, and the parliamentary group must present important and difficult questions for a decision by the National Leadership or the Executive Committee.

In early 2010 the parliamentary group voted to send a Danish war vessel to combat pirates off the coast of Somalia. RGA members protested against this decision. This matter was brought before the National Leadership which decided against the MPs who in turn accepted that they had been incorrect.

The egalitarian culture is reflected by the rules about staff, National Leadership and MPs.

Members of Parliament and staff members can only be in office in for a limited number of years. The details have changed over time, but the limit is between 7 and 11 years. Both former MPs and staff members can return to office only after two year break in another job.

They receive a salary fixed to the level of a qualified worker. For MPs, that means that they pay to

the party the amount that their parliamentary salary exceeds this level.

Traditionally any tendency towards “the cult of the individual” has been opposed. Until recently election posters would not show pictures of the top candidates on the election list. Grassroots democracy sometimes develops into extremes when for example national committees in charge of a certain area of work are not elected or appointed by the leadership but are free-for-all-members.

On the other hand the organisational culture of the RGA is in some ways not that democratic. Even though the membership has the right to vote on all major issues and elect delegates to National Conferences, they are often not presented with real strategic alternatives.

This is to a large degree a reaction to the sectarianism and factionalism of the Left of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. The RGA was established with a mood of “no more infighting”. It certainly was necessary to downplay differences in the first years of the existence of RGA to avoid it all blowing up again.

The first group of six MPs took on themselves the responsibility of keeping the RGA together at almost any price. They decided that they would form a united bloc in public whatever their differences.

This was necessary since the media tried to portray the RGA as an unprincipled device to get into Parliament. Journalists looked for any sign of disagreement and predicted a quick dissolution of the RGA.

The consequence of this decision was that the parliamentary group, having a high degree of legitimacy in the party, presented itself as a bloc to the membership. However, this way of acting did reflect a real and deeply felt sentiment in the membership of wanting to avoid splits.

However necessary this was at the beginning, it has created problems. The party never succeeded in overcoming this “together-at-any-price” sentiment, even when it was so well established that it could afford discussions and confrontation between different perspectives.

A tradition of open tendencies around issues that divide the membership and the leadership has never been developed. Instead informal cliques and groupings are formed on the basis of individual leaders and/or of former common activity in youth and student movements. At the same time important leaders usually strive to make a compromise between opposing perspectives inside the leadership, rather than bringing differences into an open democratic discussion among the membership.

Nevertheless, on a couple of occasions important debates on issues of principle have taken place in the RGA. In the second half of the 1990s, the parliamentary tactic was put to a test. The Social Democratic Party minority government had two options when they wanted their proposals adopted in Parliament: either make a deal to the right with one or both of the major bourgeois parties or make a deal to the left with the Socialist People's Party and RGA. The Socialist People's Party and RGA were invited to negotiate major economic packages. In a couple of instances the MPs from the RGA opted for participation in order to help pass important social measures, despite sections of the working class or the youth losing out. The issue of responsibility for bringing down a left government was raised.

It created some heated debate in and around the RGA, and this put a lot of media focus on the party. It is quite unusual in Denmark for MPs to ask their party leadership for advice. The National Leadership of the RGA vetoed a parliamentary deal which the party's 60 New Parties of the Left MPs accepted. The MPs returned to the negotiations with the government and had the critical parts of the proposals more or less removed, and a deal was made. The result was that the principle was

maintained of voting in parliament for even the slightest progress and against even the least setback.

Over the years, the choice between being a working class party or a party whose purpose is to help the “weak” layers of society has come up several times. This has interrelated with conflicts between sub-cultural layers wanting to realise utopian visions in the here and now, and traditional workers party and trade union layers wanting to promote the struggle on the basis of the material reality and the consciousness of the working class.

For some years this discussion revolved around the proposal of a Citizen’s Wage. The proposal was that all citizens should receive a living wage from the state, regardless of being in a job, being available for a job or not, studying or not, young or old. Besides being criticised for being utopian, opponents argued that it would be impossible to mobilise the working class behind such a demand. It was also argued that with a Citizen’s Wage, workers would have no objective interest in being part of the union run unemployment benefit scheme, and in that way it would undermine the high percentage of union membership in Denmark. In the end the Citizen’s Wage proposal was rejected by the RGA at National Conference in the late 90s.

The fight against the EU has played a major role in the RGA since its beginning. Official policy has been to reject and fight the EU, but the founding parties had very different approaches to the issue.

SAP always tried to fight the EU on a class and internationalist basis, focusing on its pro-capital, pro-neoliberal and anti-democratic character. The CP was central in building and sustaining the crossparty, almost class-collaborationist Peoples Movement against the EU in 1972. In party publications, the CP resorted to very nationalist arguments about Danish self-determination and protecting Denmark against Germany. In the Left Socialist Party internationalist tendencies were in a majority but they co-existed with more nationalist currents on this issue.

In 2002 a formal discussion on these issues was organised because a layer of young activists and party leaders reacted to the self determination line of argument. They argued on the basis of internationalism and wanted to change the party program which includes the demand for a Danish withdrawal from the EU. A part of this layer moved towards a position of reform of the EU, wanting to change the EU into a tool for pan-European decision making.

The result of the debate was basically to maintain opposition to the EU and the demand for Danish withdrawal but with more stress on the character of the EU policies, such as that they are antiecological, anti-social, and anti-worker. This decision has been not seriously been challenged since then, one reason being probably that the Peoples Movement against the EU has moved in that direction, with a member of the RGA and of the Fourth International as an MEP and leading spokesperson.

In 2007 the biggest crisis yet of the RGA erupted when a young Muslim woman, Asmaa Abdol-Hamid, was presented in the internal RGA referendum to be a parliamentary candidate. She wore a religious headscarf (hijab) and she refused to shake hands with men.

Her share of the votes in the internal referendum were so high that she was entitled to a place on the slate, and in case of a successful election result, she could be elected.

This created a huge media interest and protests inside the party. The reasons for this were numerous. A small minority claimed that the RGA is an anti-religious party and that the party should not have candidates that promote their religion visibly. A much larger group reacted because in her statements to the media she was ambiguous on democratic rights, equality of the sexes, the death

penalty and Sharia law in general. Furthermore, the opposition against her was due to the fact that she was a fairly new member of the party and her political statements did not go beyond the traditional social attitudes of reformist politicians.

On the other hand a large minority of the party saw the opposition against Asmaa as Islamophobic, which was true for much of the campaign outside the party but not so much inside the RGA.

This minority fiercely defended her, and her position on the slate.

In the end, she obtained a position on the list that made her a substitute for one of the MPs. The candidacy of Asmaa no doubt was one of several reasons for a bad election result, reducing the number of RGA MPs from six down to four. It also left the party in a crisis which was overcome a year later. But it was only in 2010, that support in opinion polls for the RGA recovered and went up from around 2% (4 MPs) to 2.5 and still increasing at the time of writing.

Asmaa has not been a candidate in the internal referendum since, but she is still a member and participated actively in the May 2010 National Conference.

### **The political change of the late 2000s**

Since 2001 Denmark has had a government composed of the two major bourgeois parties with support from a rightwing xenophobic party, the Danish Peoples Party. They have implemented neo-liberal policies without head-on confrontations with the working class and 62 New Parties of the Left the trade unions. They have mostly attacked the marginalised groups.

Their liberalisation has been sneaking, undermining public welfare and obviously favouring the ruling class and the richest layers of society.

In 2006-8 this process provoked local protests and strikes and national demonstrations against the government, but without the characteristics of an organised movement. National demonstrations were called by trade unions, students' organisations and opposition parties. Related to this movement was a national strike of public sector workers for a better national contract, and some students' mobilisations against cuts.

With no democratic structure and a very weak left presence in the unions, the Social Democratic Party and the union leadership were able to stop actions when the demands and the demonstrations went beyond their collaborationist policies. At the same time a militant youth movement was very visible in the streets of Copenhagen. This movement sometimes isolated itself from broader layers because of its anarchist methods, violent fights with police, the burning of cars and smashing of shops. On other occasions, they gained very broad sympathy.

In comparison with other countries the anti-war movement was weak in Denmark, though a couple of big demonstrations took place at the beginning of the war in Iraq. Smaller mobilisations against racism and in support of asylum seekers have taken place.

Finally there was the very big December 2009 demonstration at the time of the Copenhagen intergovernmental summit on climate change.

Compared to the previous period there has been a real and manifest growth of mobilisation, though still modest in size in comparison to some other European countries. It has not resulted in more permanent working class or popular organisation, neither is there any organised opposition within

the trade unions. A contract negotiation for the private sector in 2010 resulted in setbacks for the workers, but it was not met with any active opposition from the left.

Nevertheless there is an upward trend in mobilisations which is closely interrelated with an important left wing shift in opinion polls.

The Socialist People's Party grew enormously while the Social Democratic Party and the RGA stagnated or grew a little. Although the growth of the Socialist People's Party came at a time when the party was moving politically to the right, the overall tendency is markedly to the left in Danish politics. This leftward process had not peaked when elections were called in 2007, so the right wing government survived. Recently (second half of 2010) the Socialist People's Party have lost momentum and the Social Democratic Party and the RGA have increased their support proportionally.

The economic crisis which has made it impossible for the bourgeois government to implement rightwing liberal policies without attacking the core parts of the working class has also pushed things to the left. The Social Democratic Party and the Socialist People's Party are openly aiming at taking government after next election, and the majority of the working class is looking forward to a change of government with some expectations of improvement although they are not clearly articulated and vary from one sector to another.

### **The reaction of the Red-Green Alliance to the new period**

The party leadership and parliamentary group have fully supported the movements which have developed during this last period. Lots of RGA members have participated at leadership and grassroots levels.

But the level of party involvement has been marked by a general low level of activism in the party, the low level of political education, the lack of well-founded understanding of, and even conscious hostility to, the party's role in organised and developing social movements.

Faced with a new period and new challenges to the RGA, the many years without strategic debates and the fear of political conflict have created problems. It has made it difficult for the RGA to adapt to the new situation fully.

On the one hand the crisis and the mobilisations have helped to shift more members in the direction of an organising, interventionist and activist party.

The first visible internal reaction happened in 2008 when a group of activists and leaders from students', young workers' and other youth movements tried to initiate a discussion about what kind of party the RGA should be. They contrasted the class party with the party of the minorities and the parliamentary watchdog. To a great extent this was a reaction to the party profile in the 2007 elections - and the poor results achieved.

The criticisms of this group provoked much debate and had a positive effect on party priorities.

The positive effects were partly negated because the group ignored the demands of immigrants, asylum-seekers, LGBT's and so on and tended to define the working class as all-white-and-male instead of a working class of both sexes and all ethnic backgrounds.

Also they were marked by a very top-down leadership culture in the 64 New Parties of the Left

students' and trade union youth organisations where they gained their political experience.

This informal group helped introduce the idea of organising party members according to workplace, trade unions and branches and have been involved in the slow implementation of this policy.

This is an issue that SAP members promoted for many years. Though the adoption of that line of party building is an important step forward, problems still remain. Among the party members actively building these interventionist structures, approaches differ:

- Is it primarily for RGA members who are shop stewards, elected trade unionists or trade union employees, or is it basically an organisation of all party members in a particular workplace or trade union?
- is the task for these structures only to support traditional trade union activities or are they also structures to organise the dissemination of party policy in work places and trade unions?
- Here, like in other areas, there is an evident gap between adoption of a decision and the implementation of that same decision.

The reason that some narrow conceptions of party work exist in broad layers of the party is because of very limited working class mobilisation over the last 15-20 years. This in turn resulted in no organised left wing activities at a grassroots level in the trade unions.

RGA and other left wing workers were divided into two main groups: the majority who ignored the trade unions as a field of activity and the minority who ended up in elected positions or as employees of the unions. While remaining socialists of conviction they were not free of influence from bureaucratic ways of working. At the same time the layer of young activists wanting to organise trade union activity got most of their experience from organisations of students and young workers where they held leadership responsibility. Another informal group around some party staff members has developed quite another party-building strategy, focusing on a professional communication strategy for the parliamentary work and tending to ignore party members as the most important lever for party decision making, for promoting party policy and for mobilisations. This, too, is a result of decades of left wing activities that are not rooted in mass movements, but focussed on parliamentary activity and media debates.

The first reactions of the RGA to the economic crisis were weak and ambiguous. On the issue of bank saving support packages there was no doubt. The RGA clearly opposed these, and the thrust of the demands was that the rich must bear the burden of the crisis.

On the other hand the RGA explanation of the crisis focussed on greed and a financial sector out of control. Likewise, most of the proposals from MPs for political responses to the crisis were kept inside the framework of a Keynesian understanding.

Left wing forces, among them SAP members, criticized this and succeeded in changing party analysis of the crisis, but are still struggling with the task of developing anticapitalist political answers that can mobilise the working class and its allies.

The most unfortunate result of many years of focusing on parliamentary activity is the development of a right wing tendency in the group of RGA councillors in Copenhagen. The local council system in Copenhagen, capital of Denmark, differs from most other municipal councils in Denmark. In most cities, between 15 and 31 councillors are elected every four years, and they in turn elect one mayor.

In Copenhagen the council elects a kind of "prime mayor" plus 5 or 6 other mayors. Each

Copenhagen mayor has special administrative responsibilities: schools, social welfare, environmental issues, etc. They are elected by the council proportionally to the number of councillors from each party. The RGA is the third largest party in Copenhagen and is entitled to one mayor.

Without openly confronting the RGA parliamentary principle of supporting all progressive measures and opposing any drawbacks, the RGA mayor and the group of councillors have defined their task as to have influence and get results, even results in the sense of the lesser evil. They argue that the RGA must show that “we” can manage the Copenhagen economy to the benefit of the people, disregarding the constraints not only of capitalism but also the narrow government limits to local decision making. This parliamentary strategy pushes them towards the lesser-evil policy.

This has led to the RGA supporting cutbacks of municipal administration workers and day care centres with the result that parents and workers demonstrated against a council budget deal that the RGA supported. Fortunately, faced with the demonstrations, the RGA backtracked and pulled out of the political deal a week before local elections. The consequence was that the RGA grew in standing in the opinions polls after losing support for weeks.

## **The economic crisis and the perspective of a new government**

If the Social Democratic Party and the Socialist People’s Party form a coalition government after the next election, as expected, it will be the first time in Danish history (apart from the exceptional post World 66 New Parties of the Left War II circumstances) that a party to the left of social democracy is part of a government.

For a large section of the working class this will raise hopes for changes and improvements in living standards and public services.

But with two reformist parties governing in the middle of a severe economic crisis they are bound to be disappointed by the policies of these two parties if nothing else happens outside parliament.

The tasks of an anticapitalist party in that situation are at least threefold:

- to campaign in trade unions, student organisations, environmental movements, local communities and other movements to place demands on the two parties, to mobilise popular pressure on a new government, behind demands for a policy of social and ecological improvements and of solidarity
- to use the parliamentary platform to transmit this pressure from the working class and its allies and make it difficult for the two reformist parties to collaborate to the right
- to present and make propaganda for those anticapitalist solutions to the economic and ecological crisis that the new government refuse to implement in the name of class collaboration.

These tasks have not been totally clear to the majority of the RGA membership or to the majority of its leadership, and they still are not, though texts that point in this direction were adopted at the latest National Conference.

Tendencies to accommodate to the reformist parties have evolved. Leaders argue that it is paramount that the voters see us as part of the new majority – or else they will not vote for us. Sometimes they argue that we must not be seen as responsible for bringing down a Social Democratic Party/Socialist People’s Party government. In itself this is not wrong, but some leaders have argued against attempts to promote the anticapitalist policies of the RGA, and some leaders

have been ambiguous in their defence of the traditional RGA parliamentary principles, focusing instead on the necessity to avoid the fall of reformist party government.

These tendencies in a part of the leadership are also supported by sections of the party youth. This is a generation that has only been politically active under the reign of an openly bourgeois government.

They have never experienced a Social Democratic Party led government. This makes them naïve towards what improvements the reformists will implement by themselves without any extraparliamentary pressure. They tend to focus on the pressure that RGA MPs can bring to bear on a new government by way of clever negotiation techniques and refusal to vote for government proposals.

They don't realise that a Social Democratic Party/Socialist People's Party government will have no problems in making parliamentary deals with the right, if the two parties think they can do this without being punished by their members, the trade unions and the voters.

If a Social Democratic Party/Socialist People's Party government takes power, enormous possibilities will exist for the RGA. We may get the chance of being part of social and political mobilisations in support of demands for a new government. At the same time we will get the opportunity to make the difference between reformism and anti-capitalism visible to new layers of the working class and of the youth. The RGA can help this education process both by being at the forefront of all movements when Social Democratic and Socialist People's Party-leaders retreat and by presenting an anticapitalist program of action that combines day-to-day demands of the working class with radical reforms that break with the framework of capitalism.

But such a situation also presents dangers. The pressure of adaptation will be great, for example if the RGA wishes to avoid political responsibility for the fall of a Social-Democratic government, no matter what the reasons.

Taking into the consideration the non-militant character of the membership and the lack of political education it would be irresponsible to disregard the risk of adaptation to reformism, like the majority of the Copenhagen local councillors. This would seriously compromise the hitherto parliamentary principle of the RGA making it part of the failure of a reformist government and part of the disappointment and disillusion instead of a pole of attraction for workers and youth who are disappointed by the Social Democratic Party and the Socialist People's Party.

Debates are going on about these issues. After the May 2010 National Conference the balance is tipping towards the perspective of social mobilisation, against adaptation and for anti-capitalism. The final outcome will depend both of the level of struggles and the political debates inside the RGA.

### **Evolving SAP perspective for the RGA**

The SAP was one of the founding parties of the RGA. SAP members have been actively building the RGA ever since its foundation. In that way SAP has been a part of the life and development of the RGA.

Consequently SAP has developed its analysis of the RGA and its strategy and tactics over the years. This has been done openly in resolutions from National Conferences and the National Leadership of the New Parties of the Left of the SAP, even in the weekly political statements from the Executive Committee of SAP.



At the time of the creation of the RGA, the SAP supported the model of an electoral collaboration that could also develop common campaign activities and action. We insisted on special rights for the founding parties, and we were reluctant to give these up. We were afraid of losing control and being caught in a right-wing drift of the new organisation. In addition, veto rights for the founding parties could help avoid a split with the CP which felt especially insecure among its new partners.

When the numbers of non-aligned members grew, they naturally insisted in establishing the RGA as an ordinary member-led organisation. They were supported by the Left Socialist Party, and finally the SAP and the CP accepted this.

This development, combined with parliamentary representation, forced the RGA to take positions on more and more issues. The demand for a strategic political program began to appear.

Members of SAP engaged in the debates on what political positions to take – and in the work of developing a strategic program.

But all the time we stressed that the RGA should not adapt strategic positions that might jeopardise the unity of the existing forces. For a long period we worked from the perspective of preserving such a broad unity and at the same time working for a revolutionary regroupment inside the RGA– with parts of the Left Socialist Party in our mind. At the same time we gradually tried to introduce the notion of the RGA as a mobilising force in social struggles and movements.

In 1999 a National Conference of the SAP took stock of the reality that the RGA now was a political party in the ordinary Danish sense of that word. A resolution stated that “Red-Green Alliance is not a revolutionary party in the classical Leninist sense (based on democratic centralism, with a developed program for a socialist revolution, etc.), and we do not consider it desirable to try to enforce a development in this direction. Neither the subjective, nor the objective conditions for such a development are present at the moment.” But signifying a new SAP-perspective we wrote: “At this stage of development of the Red-Green Alliance we can merely note that there is no pre-set limit as to how far the Red-Green Alliance might develop towards an actual revolutionary party. But, on the other hand, the work of SAP inside the Red-Green Alliance has such a policy as its guiding line.” As a consequence of this 1999 analysis we decided to channel future public political activities through the RGA and through the youth organisation collaborating with the RGA. This meant that the SAP from then on has not engaged as a party in organising demonstrations, that we have not organised interventions of the SAP in unions and social movements and that only in exceptional circumstances have we distributed leaflets independently of the RGA.

This kind of work we have done, if at all possible, as members of the RGA.

The SAP, nevertheless, has continued to publish a monthly magazine, to organise our annual public educational seminar and the occasional public meetings.

In 2006 we confirmed and consolidated this perspective for our work in the RGA and even took it a bit further. In a National Conference resolution we wrote: “The RGA can therefore be the necessary organised socialist force in today’s struggles, in tomorrow’s struggles and in the socialist revolution; the organisation that can meet the tasks we have described in this text. This is what we wish to build Enhedslisten as, this is what we want Enhedslisten to become, and this is what we need!” We analysed the weak points of the RGA and the qualities that the SAP can contribute, and we set ourselves the task of introducing “more class, more struggle, more party” into the RGA, that is developing it into a class struggle party.

The fundamental task of the SAP was defined as helping build the RGA (and the youth organisation

SUF) in all aspects. The RGA is “our party”, and the SAP is a necessary tool for organising our effort in building the RGA – especially necessary and useful because of our historic tradition, our political and practical experiences and our membership of the Fourth International.

**Michael Voss**

12 January 2011

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**P.S.**

\* Michael Voss is a member of the Red-Green Alliance and of the Socialist Workers’ Party, the Danish section of the Fourth International. As a representative of the SAP, he participated in the negotiations that led to the establishment of the RGA. From 1995 to 2006, he he worked as a journalist and press officer for the parliamentary group of the RGA. He is an executive committee member of the SAP.