

Bureaucracy, Ernest Mandel legacy and the Danish Red-Green Alliance

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In the 1960's Ernest Mandel analysed the bureaucracy of the labour movement. 50 years later his thoughts are introduced into the debates about the Danish Red Green Alliance. A growing number of party full-timers make it relevant.

With the success of Enhedslisten (Red Green Alliance - RGA) have come a growing professional apparatus. It benefits the party in many ways, but along follows the risk that the apparatus is defining politics and that a really party bureaucracy develops.

These are the introducing words of an article written by Mikael Hertoft, a member of the National Leadership of the RGA. Hertoft recently reread a booklet published in neighbouring Sweden in the late 60's. Its title is "On bureaucracy - an analysis of the ever threatening danger of the labour movement", and it is written by the late Fourth International leader and Marxist economist, Ernest Mandel.

After reading it he decided to translate parts of it and to have a look at its relevance for the RGA. Both the translation and his own article have been published in the Danish web magazine "Socialistisk Information".

Hertoft has counted around 60 members that earn their living from working one way or the other for the party. The bulk of these are the 12 MP's and their secretariat in parliament, about 25 persons. Additionally a group of members is employed by the national party office, and a few are working full time as elected representatives in municipalities. Both these groups will increase further in numbers if RGA gets the the number of votes and the MP's at the next election that present opinion polls indicate.

Most of these positions are funded by the state. All parties receive a sum of money according to the number of votes they received in the last elections. Most of this is used for full timers at the national office.

The state also allocates a larger sum of money to party groups in parliament. This money is earmarked secretarial assistance for the MP's. The party can only to a very limited extend use it for the support of party activity outside parliament.

"The state funding rules systematically increases the weight of the parliamentary work of the RGA vis-a-vis militant grass root activity," Hertoft writes in his article.

Referring to Ernest Mandel, Hertoft stresses that of course the RGA must make the most of this professional workforce by building strong centres of activity in parliament, at the national office and in provincial centres. "The only alternative would be to insist on amateur work which would never gain influence and would never be able to head a socialist revolution," Hertoft writes.

At the same time he argues that we must learn from Mandel's analysis. A functional bureaucracy will turn into a social layer with its own interests if measures are not taken to counter this tendency.

As Hertoft explains the RGA already from its birth 25 years ago implemented two of the basic principles which Mandel recommends on the basis of the Karl Marx and the experiences of the Paris Commune.

One of these concerns income. Employees of the party and elected members earn what equals the wage of a skilled worker in metal industry in the Copenhagen area. This is at the upper end of a workers' wage in Denmark. Of course state salary for MP's is much higher, so RGA MP's pay the difference as a party tax.

The other principle concerns rotation. The details differ, but basically a member is only allowed to earn his or her living from working for the party in 10 years. The party employee must leave the job, and the MP cannot stand the next election. After a two year break they can apply for a job again and they can stand another election. The same principle goes for members of the National Leadership, even though they are not employed by the party.

These are principles that are worth defending. The wage rule means that for the most people there are not material benefits attached to working professionally for the party, and the rotation rule prevent people from making a lifelong living out of politics and from defending this position at all costs.

But Hertoft points to the fact that there are other privileges than the material ones. Very important for engaged socialists is the fact that as a party professional you can work full time for "the cause" instead of wasting your working hours on some meaningless job.

Secondly he points to the problems that arise from having a huge group of party professionals working in parliament. They primarily discuss with each other, with other MP's and with journalists from big capital media. This exerts a daily pressure on them coming only from people to the political right of themselves. "They tend to be sucked into the Danish establishment," Hertoft writes.

Hertoft also fears that the party apparatus develop a state of mind and a consciousness of themselves being "the real party". They may end up seeing party members as something only to be mobilised for occasional elections.

"Critical members that don't phrase their criticism as smooth as politicians, may be considered annoying to the apparatus," Hertoft writes, and he warns against a development where the apparatus starts defending its own special interests, its own existence. Making a priority of increasing number of votes at the cost of defending important socialist principles is one of the ways that such a "special interest" based on their daily political environment could quickly manifest itself, Hertoft argues.

I think that the warnings of Ernest Mandel and Mikael Hertoft are important. Already today there is a situation in the party where most political views and statements are developed by the MP's and their secretariat.

Basically the RGA is very democratic. Party statutes leave no doubt: The annual national convention, the National Leadership and the Executive Bureau (composed of elected NL-members, meeting on a weekly basis) have the final say in important political decisions. But formalities and realities are not always the same.

The MP-group is forced to decide on many political issues on a daily basis which no elected

leadership body has the resources to discuss or vote on. Maybe more problematic: MP's and the MP-secretariat have so much resources for developing the politics of the RGA in new areas or suggesting changes to already decided politics that neither party members nor elected leaderships with ordinary full time jobs can match. If the MP/secretariat group adapt their views to each other - which is of course not certain, but likely - they are able to analyse, document and argue on much more qualified level than the rest of the party and in the way impose their views on the party - within the formal democratic framework.

The preconditions for a special layer with its own priorities exist. It has not developed and there is time to counter it.

To do this, Hertoft suggests some tightening up of wage and rotation rules. He points to party members as the force to counter the development of a bureaucracy in the RGA. He suggests new and better channels for democratic discussions, more political education and new fora for social and cultural party life. He also argues that the party must consciously educate party members with a background in the working class and experiences from popular layers and movements - educate them both for the tasks of party leaders and for elected representatives.

Finally he argues that the party must find ways to counter the financial tendency to focus on parliamentary politics and instead build party activities in social movements and other grass root activities.

By raising the debate and by introducing the Marxist analyses of bureaucracy, Mikael Hertoft has already contributed to solving the problem. Especially by pointing to the social and material foundation of bureaucracy he has minimised the risk that the debate turns into finger pointing and personal blaming. Hopefully other party members, including the full timers, will contribute to the debate.

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P.S.

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