

Denmark's Red-Green Alliance: Challenging the European Union Fiscal Pact

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Red carpet and champagne marked the start of the first [Red-Green Alliance](#) (RGA) congress since the party tripled its mandate at a poll in September 2011. The 385 delegates representing the 8000 members packed a basketball stadium in the migrant and working-class Copenhagen suburb of Norrebro to grapple with the party's new increased influence on Danish politics. Party membership has more than doubled in the past two years, with the party welcoming into its ranks many ex-members of the Social Democratic and Socialist People's parties.



Red Green Alliance activists campaigning in February.

Danes voted in droves in last year's elections to punish the right-wing parties. The poll resulted in the Social Democrats heading a coalition government - and Denmark's first woman prime minister. But this took place on the back of the lowest vote for the Social Democrats since 1906.

There was also a collapse in support for the country's most right-wing parties, including the overtly racist Danish People's Party (DPP). The vote for left parties rose. The Social Liberals are the most conservative of the four left-of-centre parties supporting the government and the RGA the most radical. The RGA jumped from four to 12 seats in parliament, winning 6.7% of the vote. All RGA MPs get only a skilled worker's wage, donating the rest to the party.

The new government follows 10 years of conservatives in office. Among trade unionists and working-class communities that organized to oust the conservatives in a similar style to the Australian "Your Rights at Work" campaign, there are huge expectations. With the Social Democrats and their partners in the government rapidly renegeing on election promises and tracking to the right, the RGA has unique opportunities and challenges ahead.

The minority Social Democrat government led by [Helle Thorning-Schmidt](#) relies on a coalition of left and centre parties to govern. The RGA supports the government against motions of "no confidence," but the party is not formally part of government and votes for legislation case by case. The votes of RGA MPs are crucial, however, to enable the government to pass key laws, including the budget.

Difficult Negotiations

The congress delegates reflected in some detail on the difficult experience of negotiating with the government over this year's budget. Party spokesperson Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen said:

"No one should doubt that if the government chooses the compassionate way, then we stand ready. We are ready to negotiate, and we are not afraid of compromise. In return, I want to say one thing very clear to the government: You'll never be able to threaten the Alliance to vote for cuts in welfare. Never! Even if the threat is that you'll call an election. This kind of bullying does not work on us."

To try to bring community pressure on the negotiations, the RGA conducted a series of consultations with students, unions and community groups to gather proposals. The party prioritized these proposals and made it clear to the government that the votes of the RGA depended on these measures.

Negotiations with the government were conducted by a team nominated by the 25 elected members of the RGA's National Board. The authority to authorize MPs to vote in favour of the budget is held by the board.

The RGA's ultimate support for the budget hinged on the inclusion of five weeks' holiday for recipients of social assistance, as well as giving the unemployed more opportunities for retraining and education rather than being forced back into the labour market. The budget also included some progressive taxation reforms, including a higher tax on large companies and a tax on printed advertising materials.

The congress revisited a big debate from last year. This came after a majority of the National Board endorsed the vote of the party's MPs in favour of Danish support for the UN-NATO intervention in Libya. This support was later retracted by the board and MPs as the intervention in Libya unfolded. At last year's congress, a vote to endorse the actions of the board's majority was carried by a margin of just 13 votes.

In the lead up to the congress, the party conducted seminars throughout the country to debate in what circumstances the party would support military action. The result of these seminars was a resolution put to the congress designed to guide the party. Delegates adopted the resolution, which provides very limited circumstances in which, for humanitarian reasons and having all other options exhausted, the party would support UN-led military interventions. Some delegates expressed concern about the practicality of the resolution in the context of further military interventions. Others regarded it as an important framework to guide the party.

Challenges Ahead?

Big challenges lie ahead, as the government is moving to cut unemployment benefits from four to two years, and raise working hours and the retirement age. The congress launched a campaign to "Fight unemployment, not the unemployed" this year.

A decision was also made to run a campaign to force the government to hold a referendum on Danish support for the European Union Fiscal Pact. This pact will bind the EU countries to implement cuts to public spending and debt.

Also high on the campaign agenda is scrapping the discriminatory immigration rules that prevent Danish citizens with less than 28 years of residency from bringing their wife or husband to Denmark. These laws were passed by the previous government at the initiative of the far-right Danish People's Party.

With the RGA enjoying a growing and enthusiastic membership and a huge mainstream national profile, its future looks bright. It already has strong representation in local councils and looks set to extend that base in next year's elections.

Despite its bright electoral prospects, delegates and MPs alike were at pains throughout the conference to point to the limits of negotiating change in parliament. Much discussion focused on building campaigns outside parliament.

National Board member Per Clausen said: "The main challenge for us is to bring optimism and the belief that political activity is useful. And when we go from here we spread that belief into the workplace, in homes and taverns." •

Jody Betzien is a writer for [Green Left weekly](#) where this article first appeared.

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