

Danish government toughens laws for foreigners

By Helmut Arens
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Only 50 days after taking office, Denmark's new right-wing conservative government—a minority coalition of Venstre (liberals) and the Conservative People's Party, supported by the extreme xenophobic Danish People's Party (DPP)—has confirmed the worst fears about the new government's course.

Following a crassly xenophobic campaign in the run-up to the elections—above all, by Venstre and the DPP—Venstre's Bertel Haarder, the minister responsible for refugees, immigration and integration of foreigners, announced the tabling of a bill on January 17, which will result in a drastic deterioration of conditions for refugees and immigrants.

The government is making no secret of its intention “to limit the number of refugees entering Denmark and to sharpen demands that they support themselves without state support once in the country”. Haarder made the economically motivated reasons for the government's course patently obvious when he said: “These days foreigners are a burden on society. They cost more than they are worth to the country. That will have to change.”

In line with this, the government is also planning an easing of immigration policy in one respect. Through the introduction of a Green Card system for hand-picked immigrants, it is intent on buttressing Denmark's prosperity by bringing qualified foreign workers into the country. This led the German newspaper *Taz* to comment: “Anyone who isn't a white, Christian computer expert with fluent Danish shouldn't bother to show his face.”

In particular, the following regulations are to be adopted:

According to Haarders, a decisive means of reducing the number of asylum-seekers coming into the country will be the scrapping of the concept of a “de facto refugee”. Up until now many asylum-seekers, having no chance of gaining admittance to most other EU countries, have been granted entry into Denmark under this

category. The government's 10-page white paper claims that “this will constitute an essential and principled tightening of the conditions for the granting of asylum, which the government considers necessary.” Measures will also be adopted to prevent refugees from becoming residents. Unlike previously, they will no longer receive permanent residency after three years, but will normally have to return to their own country.

In future, the right to permanent residency will only be granted after at least seven years. Moreover, refugees will be subject to travel restrictions. Whoever makes a visit to his former homeland runs the risk of being deprived of his residency permit.

The government also plans to make the process for acquiring Danish citizenship more difficult for foreigners. Obtaining citizenship will only be possible after eight years of uninterrupted residency. Further prerequisites include learning the Danish language and attending integration courses. On top of this, claims to social security will not be permitted.

Rejected asylum-seekers are to be extradited within 24 hours, regardless of any legal challenge to the rejection order.

Another important measure, viewed by numerous critics as an offence against international norms, is the proposal to allow married partners to be reunited in Denmark only when both are older than 24 years of age. A further condition prohibits any access to social support for such cases. Parents older than 60 will no longer be allowed to join their families living in the country.

Welfare aid for refugees and immigrants is to be drastically reduced. Foreigners will have the right to claim full benefits only after seven years of residence. Labour Minister Claus Hjort Frederiksen defended this proposal as follows: “Foreigners coming into Denmark should know from the very beginning that they are expected to find work. This is not the land of milk and

honey where you can simply lie under a palm tree and enjoy life. These new proposals should be an incentive for such people to accept even low-paid jobs.”

These remarks are particularly cynical in view of the fact that there is scarcely any labour market in Europe which is so thoroughly insulated against foreigners as in Denmark. Non-white youth with foreign sounding names, even if they have grown up in Denmark and speak fluent Danish, have virtually no chance of finding an apprenticeship or a job.

Andreas Kam, general secretary of the Danish council for refugees, addressed another aspect of the government’s policy. He pointed out that, if more people can be induced to take up jobs by cutting their social benefits, why should not the same conditions sooner or later be set for Danes?

The government wants to aid its offensive against the fundamental democratic rights of immigrants and refugees by blocking its critics’ sources of finance. It intends to reduce or cut completely financial support for numerous refugee and human rights organisations. The renowned International Centre for Human Rights, which until now has upheld Denmark’s reputation in the struggle for human rights, will also be affected. United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson criticised this policy decision in a letter to Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen: “Presumably less democratic governments in other parts of the world will take it as a welcome opportunity to hold back progress in human rights.”

The social-democratic opposition denounced the plans as an ideological campaign and a “massacre” and is being supported in its criticism by a number of experts. It is claimed that the government is concerned less with cutting costs than with being able to secure complete control over all sections of society. Currently some of the commissions, experts and lobby groups are regarded by the government as constituting uncontrollable potential for the criticism it is seeking to eliminate.

Pia Kjaersgaard, chairperson of the xenophobic DPP whose votes should help the package of laws achieve a majority in parliament, greeted the proposals enthusiastically and described their advent as “a milestone” and an “important day in the history of Denmark”. It is no wonder that she should think so, under conditions where her own policies are being implemented even without her party being directly involved in government.

Although the government’s plans will greatly please the

right-wing nationalist governments in Vienna and Rome, they have met with sharp criticism from refugee organisations, opposition politicians and also from abroad. The talk is of a “barbed-wire fence being set up around Denmark.” Mona Sahlin, the Swedish minister for integration, called the Danish proposals “shameful”.

Elisabeth Arnold, spokesperson for the Radical Liberals (Radikale Venstre), characterised the proposals as “xenophobic”, while Ritt Bjerregard of the Social Democrats called them “quite repulsive”. Her party colleague Britta Christensen, the mayor of a suburb of Copenhagen, said, “They are utterly outrageous and based on a shocking view of human nature.”

The criticism from the Social Democrats would have been more convincing had they not themselves expressed the same conception of human nature during their time in governmental office and up to the election two months ago. Karen Jespersen, the interior minister at the time, wanted to intern criminal asylum-seekers on a remote island and announced that she never wanted to live in a multicultural society. And Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, the social-democratic prime minister, had assured his fellow citizens that the Danes under his government would no longer “have to feel like strangers in their own land” and that Denmark would not become a multiethnic country under any circumstances.

However, the criticism of the Social Democrats has also turned out to be quite guarded. Some aspects of the proposals were regarded as inhuman, others as good. After all, the Social Democrats themselves had already tabled an even more restrictive asylum policy during the election campaign, which was dominated by the issue of immigration policy.

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