

Danish unions sell-out strike in face of lockout

By Ellis Wynne
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Weeks of negotiations between representatives of the Danish state, regional and municipal employers and trade union leaders have averted strike action by large groups of workers and a possible lockout by employers.

Public services across the country would have been hit, including healthcare, transport and education provision. Approximately 440,000 workers faced being locked out if the dispute had not been settled.

The sell-out agreement, covering 750,000 public sector workers, was signed April 28, under the official conciliation unit, Forligsinstitutionen. The unions first issued notification of strikes at the beginning of March, proposing to bring out 10 to 15 percent of workers across key public services. This followed the collapse of the annual talks, OK 2018, on pay and conditions at state and local level from April 1.

The unions called for pay rises of 8.2 percent over three years inclusive of fixed supplements, to match pay in the private sector, a resolution of the issue of teachers' working time and the retention of paid lunch breaks.

Paid lunch breaks in the public sector are worth DK 27 to 29 billion (£8.5 billion) a year.

Municipal authorities offered 6.7 percent. Michael Ziegler, the municipal authorities' lead negotiator, said any larger pay rise was unaffordable and every percentage rise over and above would mean the loss of 5,000 jobs in local government, with productivity increases for those remaining.

Support for the public sector workers was widespread and growing. The *Avisen* newspaper reported April 2 that almost 90 percent of Danes thought the dispute was important and an issue of welfare provision. State broadcaster *Dansk Radio (DR)* said public sector workers had support among many workers in the private sector.

Such was the level of anger that on March 22, 10,000

shop stewards and other union representatives were forced to meet nationally to prepare for the likelihood of upcoming strikes.

In the deal agreed, state employees are offered 8.1 percent over three years and a "guaranteed" paid lunch break. Regional employees are offered 8.1 percent over three years. Of this, just 6.1 percent represents the "real" pay rise as 2 percent is to be allocated to "pools" for low earners and to ensure equal pay. Academics will get a lunch break in return for a reduction of 0.35 percent in their pay.

The teachers' demands were not met, with the unions agreeing to a toothless commission to address their grievances. Many teachers are angered by the deal with one quoted in *Politician* April 29 stating that teachers' union leader and chief negotiator for the municipal unions, Anders Bond, "has sold the possibilities of our strike for a draft of hot air."

The union bureaucracy is fearful that the agreement will be rejected by teachers with Dote Lange, deputy leader of the teachers' union, telling *Politician* April 30, "We know that many teachers are disappointed and many will vote 'no' in protest to the deal because they are dissatisfied with the treatment they have received over many years."

Further details of the sell-out were made public in *Avisen* April 30, with the state employees' agreement on lunch breaks allowing for the employer to "ask" employees to work up to 42 hours if need be without overtime rates. These requests will not require the agreement of union stewards.

The rotten deal was summed up by Lizette Risgaard, head of the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), who told *Politiken* May 1 that "a solution for all was never conceived as the same solution for all."

Prior to the sell-out, the union leaders, aware of the anger over the lockout of the teachers in 2013 and the betrayal of their struggle, boasted that this time the

public sector unions would not leave a group of workers isolated.

On March 6, Sophie Løhde, the minister for innovation, announced that a lockout affecting 120,000 state employees would be put into effect April 10 should the strike take place. The municipal authorities announced a lockout of 250,000 staff on the same date and the regional authorities—responsible for the public health services—gave notice of a lockout of 50,000 workers. Løhde argued that although a relatively small percentage of workers would be involved in strikes, they would prove effective.

The Municipal Authorities Association voted overwhelmingly for a lockout. Jakob Bundsgaard, a Social Democrat and newly appointed head of the Municipal Authorities' Association, said in *Arbejderen* March 9, "A lockout is the only means that KL [Municipal Authorities' Association] has of putting pressure on the negotiators and of averting a conflict that may otherwise drag on for months."

Fleming Vinthner, lead negotiator for the unions at state level, agreed, stating, "It is clear that Denmark cannot stand such an extensive conflict for very long. Therefore, the arrow points to a relatively speedy resolution."

The conciliation board initially ruled that strike action could not begin until April 18 and the lockouts not until April 24 while they tried to prevent any strikes. Strikes and the deadline for negotiations under the auspices of the board were then pushed back once more to May 1.

Talks were restructured so that each demand was treated separately, and negotiations held with each employer individually. *Dansk Radio* reported April 24 that several leading negotiators believed that agreements could be reached at regional level, even though talks at state level might end in deadlock. This position was backed by Ziegler, with *Den Offentlige* reporting that he viewed agreements in local areas as a damage limitation exercise that would lessen the impact of a major strike.

The broad support for strikes and the threat by the employers to lock out hundreds of thousands of workers reveal a sharpening of the class struggle in Denmark.

Vivid in workers' memories is the isolation of the teachers' struggle in 2013.

Following a lockout, the government imposed Law 409 to regulate working hours and conditions. Mette Frederiksen, the present leader of the Social Democrats, was then the employment minister and directly involved in the lockout. She came out in support of the current threat of lockouts and urged politicians to refrain from interfering in the matter.

Bjarne Corydon, the finance minister under Thorning Schmidt in 2013, played a central role in the attack on the teachers. He advocated the concept of the "competition state" and is responsible for the creation of the "modernising administration," aimed at slashing state expenditure.

Dennis Kristensen, leader of the FOA public service union, who helped to isolate the teachers, wrote in the magazine *Raeson* that in the run-up to the 2011 general election Corydon came up with the slogan "Fair Solution." This was a reference to plans that would entail cuts of up to 40,000 posts in the public sector, later revised down to 25,000.

The ruling elite have agreed to settle the dispute in the immediate term, while preparing a further offensive. Henrik Dahl, a prominent supporter of Liberal Alliance, a junior partner in the right-wing coalition government, was quoted in the *Avisen* March 26 that money for wage rises would have to come from cuts in core welfare.

Confederation of Danish Employers CEO Jacob Holbraad said that the wage deal was higher than a 6.9 percent three-year pay rise agreed between authorities and private employers last year and threatened the competitiveness of private corporations. "[I]t is concerning, because there is a risk of it affecting wage levels in the private sector, which could cause a loss of growth and jobs in Denmark," he said.

Løhde stated in response that the deal costing €3.6 billion was "economically viable," adding, "We have been able to bring calm to the public sector labour market by not only reaching an agreement with the state, but also regions and municipalities."

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