

Denmark buys unreliable antibody tests to enforce back-to-work amid COVID-19 pandemic

By Jordan Shilton
5 May 2020

Denmark's Social Democrat government has purchased unreliable antibody tests as part of its reckless back-to-work campaign. The minority government, which became one of the first in Europe to send pupils back to primary school last month, despite persistent questions about the role young children play in spreading the virus, has invested 120 million kroner (about €18 million) in antibody tests produced in China.

The authorities claim that the tests can show how many people have already been infected with the virus, including those who showed no symptoms, and are thus immune. However, questions remain about whether the tests are effective, whether patients who recover from coronavirus are immune, and if they are, how long this immunity lasts. The World Health Organisation has explicitly warned governments against assuming that COVID-19 patients develop immunity and stressed that further research is required.

However, Danish authorities are determined to use the tests as they push to restart the economy as soon as possible. Beyond the major purchase of tests by the central government, Denmark's five regional administrations have purchased 1.4 million antibody tests from the Chinese Livzon brand, according to *Politiken*. Even the right-wing Indian government led by the arch-reactionary Narendra Modi has described Livzon's antibody tests as "useless," while Denmark's own disease control agency, the Serum Institute (SSI), refuses to use the tests due to a reported accuracy rate of just 77 percent.

With a population of 5.8 million, Denmark has recorded 9,670 coronavirus cases as of Monday and 493 deaths. During the initial outbreak, testing was heavily restricted, meaning infection rates are likely much higher. Even health staff in three regions—Central, Southern and

Copenhagen—were denied tests in March, as authorities only had enough resources to test seriously sick patients.

Social Democrat Prime Minister Mette Fredriksen is expected to announce another wave of re-openings this week, since the current order is due to expire on Sunday. Fredriksen already allowed children from kindergarten to year 5 to return to school as of April 15. Hairdressers, tattoo parlours, nail salons, and other businesses reopened on April 20. Even major stores like Ikea, where large crowds of shoppers typically gather, reopened in late April.

Unsurprisingly, Denmark's reproduction rate has risen from 0.6 in mid-April prior to the reopening of schools to 0.9 at the end of the month. A reproduction rate above 1 indicates that each infected person passes the virus onto more than one person on average, which leads to an exponential growth of infections.

The alarming rise of the reproduction rate was brushed aside as insignificant by the authorities, as they prepare to go even further. Fredriksen declared last Thursday that the coronavirus is "under control," while the SSI claimed the spread of the virus has "not accelerated" since the opening of primary schools.

Defending the opening of schools, Fredriksen stated that the move was necessary so parents could get back to work and "get the economy going again."

The Social Democrat government is reportedly pushing for a reopening of all high schools by mid-May. The fact that this could lead to a dramatic spike in COVID-19 cases was underscored by research showing that the virus is already spreading particularly widely among teenagers. SSI figures revealed that 11 out of 100,000 teenagers have been infected, an increase from just 4 per 100,000 at the beginning of April.

Opposition to the precipitous reopening of the economy

is building. A Facebook group set up by a parent titled “My kid will not be a guinea pig for COVID-19” has attracted over 40,000 members.

The rush to force people back to work even though the threat from the pandemic has by no means subsided is motivated above all by business considerations. At the beginning of last month, Denmark’s National Bank warned that a prolonged shutdown of the economy, which relies heavily on exports, could lead to a contraction of up to 10 percent in GDP. The Bank noted that a rapid reopening of economic activity, coupled with recoveries across Europe, could limit the downturn to 3 percent.

As in every other European country, vast sums of money are being made available to big business. Some 120 billion kroner (about €18 billion) in tax deferrals, including VAT and corporation tax, have been given to Danish businesses. Additionally, the National Bank has eased corporate access to liquidity.

Denmark’s debt to GDP ratio is comparatively low at just over 30 percent; the government’s pro-business measures are expected to raise it to over 40 percent. This low debt ratio has been achieved through savage austerity over recent years, under both Social Democrat and right-wing Liberal-led governments. Inequality has also risen significantly. While Denmark’s Gini coefficient stood at the relatively low level of 0.22 in 1990, it has since gone up to 0.29.

Although Denmark’s was one of the first governments to unveil a wage subsidy programme, paying 75 percent of workers’ wages if their employer kept them on payroll, the measure is limited to a four-month period. Support will expire on July 8, after which participating companies are free to fire staff. To obtain payments, workers had to take five days of holiday. At least 150,000 workers are receiving payments through the scheme. However, Employment Minister Peter Hummelgaard stressed in April that there is no guarantee that all workers will have a job to return to when the support expires. The jobless rate has already surpassed the highest level recorded during the 2008 economic crisis.

The Social Democrat minority government’s pro-business response to the pandemic, including its reckless drive for a premature return to work, depends on the support Fredriksen enjoys from petty-bourgeois pseudo-left parties. Fredriksen became Prime Minister last June, after concluding an alliance with the Socialist People’s Party (SF), Social Liberals, and Red Green Alliance (RGA). The latter formation is an alliance of ex-Stalinists and the Danish section of the Pabloite United

Secretariat, the Socialist Workers Party (SAP).

For a decade, the SAP has played a key role in providing left cover for reactionary, right-wing policies. During Helle Thorning-Schmidt’s Social Democrat-led government in 2011-2015, the RGA twice voted for the state budget. This helped Thorning-Schmidt slash spending in line with European Union-dictated debt reduction requirements, which saw Denmark cut its structural deficit by 1.5 percent per year between 2011 and 2013. In 2014, the RGA voted unanimously to send Danish troops to Iraq to support the US imperialist-led war against ISIS.

Under Fredriksen, the RGA endorsed more reactionary measures, scapegoating immigrants for the deepening social crisis produced by decades of austerity. In December, the Social Democrats vastly expanded their “ghetto list,” a record of neighbourhoods across the country deemed socially undesirable. These “ghettos” invariably include districts with high immigrant populations. Residents are forced to send their children to kindergarten to receive classes on Danish values and traditions.

Nonetheless, the RGA enthused at its congress last October about the “progressive commitments” it had achieved from Fredriksen’s “A Fair Direction for Denmark” pact, which she signed with the SF, Social Liberals, and RGA upon taking power.

The pseudo-left RGA’s role in providing Fredriksen with a “left” cover as she forces workers back to work amid a pandemic is in line with the role being played by similar petty bourgeois forces internationally. In Spain, the populist Podemos, which is part of a Socialist Party-led coalition government, forced construction and other workers back to their jobs last month even as the coronavirus continued to run rampant. Now, with total cases approaching 250,000 and more than 25,400 deaths, the PSOE-Podemos government is further lifting restrictions.

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