

Denmark: Workers Fight Back

The wave of strikes during March and April this year marks the greatest class struggle in Denmark for 30 years. For those who argue that the European working class has been co-opted, these recent events show that workers are prepared to fight back. At the roots of the conflict lies the economic recession, and the government's attempt to make workers pay for the crisis.

The unions demanded a 35-hour week, a minimum wage, and wage increases to offset a 10% inflation rate. Negotiations with private employers collapsed on 21 March and the main union federation, the Landsorganisation, called a strike for the 25th. 300,000 industrial workers struck. When 200,000 public sector workers threatened to come out in support, the conservative Schluter government declared the strike illegal. This led to a series of massive demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of workers. Some workers remained on strike for up to 3 weeks. They were supported by a series of sympathy strikes involving public sector workers. On April 10, 200,000 marched through Copenhagen, bringing the capital city to a standstill in the biggest mobilisation since 1956, when Danish workers struck to reduce the working week from 48 to 40 hours.

The strike movement witnessed an upsurge of militancy and organisation amongst the rank and file. The April 10 demonstration was preceded by a mass meeting of 4,000 shop stewards from the Copenhagen area. However the traditional labour leadership were not willing to risk an all-out confrontation with the government and workers were allowed to drift back to work.

During the strike police attacked a demonstration in the city of Odensee, putting sixty people in hospital. When police attacked a picket line at the main railway station in Copenhagen, train drivers, who are legally prohibited from striking, protested with the first work stoppage since 1945. Across the country workplace activists and shop stewards have been fired. A campaign is now underway in support of those victimised. Whatever the immediate setbacks, the strike movement forged a new layer of union militants prepared to defend workers' interests against the present ruling class offensive. (SALB correspondent, April 1985)