

Norway's Unions Confront Neoliberalism

A Country Report from a Meeting of Left Trade Unionists in Europe

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For a long time, Norway has represented an exception in Europe and the world. The main reason has been the abundance of oil revenue, which has made Norway the only country in Europe without net state debt. Quite the opposite, the Norwegian government has a huge surplus – most of it in the form of the so-called “Government Pension Fund – Global.” Until recently, Norwegian workers have therefore not felt the effects of the financial and economic crisis as strongly as most other workers in Europe. For example, unemployment rates have mostly been between 2.5 and 3.5 per cent over the last ten years.

However, since the dramatic fall of oil prices started in 2014, the situation has also changed in Norway. Unemployment has increased, particularly in the oil and oil servicing industries. It is now close to 5 per cent – and still growing.

At the [parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2013](#), the red-green government (consisting of the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party) lost after 8 years in power, and a right wing government took over. This change of majority was partly due to a well-known phenomenon in Europe over the last 20 years, where centre-left governments have lost power, with socialist left parties as the biggest losers. This is what happens when left parties surrender to more or less neoliberal policies – and even participate in U.S./NATO led war adventures. After the defeat, the Norwegian Socialist Left Party has thus been in a deep political crisis, fighting to come over the 4 per cent electoral threshold (while it had 12-13 per cent support in the period before the election in 2005).

The Rise of the Right

The current right wing government (also called the “blue-blue” government) consists of the Conservative Party and the Progress Party (right wing populists), which, for the first time, became part of a government in Norway. The two parties do not have a majority in the Parliament, though, so they are dependent on at least one of two centre parties (the Christian Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, which is more neoliberal than liberal). The political move to the right has also been fuelled by the rapid increase of refugees to Norway last year, not least because the Labour Party to a large degree follows the strict anti-refugee policy of the Progress party.

Privatization, centralization and attacks on labour legislation are important ingredients of the policy of the right wing government. One of the most controversial issues so far, was the change of the Labour Law at the beginning of 2015, including an opening for more temporary work and a weakening of working hours’ regulations. This was met by a short national general strike as well as demonstrations all over the country in January last year –

without having any effect on the government, though.



Even though real wages have increased for most workers in Norway ever since the beginning of the 1990s, a downward pressure has been felt in some industries – particularly where employers exploit workers from Central and Eastern Europe on the Single European labour market. Social dumping has therefore become an increasing problem in transport, construction, cleaning and some other industries. One of the measures to fight this development has been to make it possible to generalize collective agreements to cover all workers in an industry, whether unionised or not. This has been in operation in industries like construction, ship building and for electricians for some years, and also cleaners and goods and passenger road transport have been included over the last couple of years.

Image: May Day rallies in Norway.

In the public sector, neoliberal, market oriented reforms (New Public Management) have been the order of the day ever since the 1980s – regardless of what kind of government we have had. Increased control from above, increased detailed and meaningless reporting and increased demand for loyalty to management have therefore contributed to undermining working conditions and workers' control of their own work. A growing criticism of and resistance against this development is slowly emerging.

Some Positive Initiatives

Interestingly, we have seen some positive tendencies regarding privatization policies in Norway over the last couple of years, particularly at municipal level. At the local elections in September last year, centre-left majorities took over many of the biggest cities, and some of these new majorities have started to re-municipalize some of the services which had previously been privatized or tendered out to private companies. This is the case for some of the nursing homes for elderly, for cleaning of public buildings and for the use of temporary workers' agencies. A coalition of trade unions and other organizations in our Campaign for the Welfare State has been instrumental in developing this policy, in a national campaign against "welfare profiteers," as we call them.

A campaign which was initiated by some local trade union organizations and political parties on the left against the weakening of the labour laws, has also had some success. A number of local councils, both at the municipal and at the county level have thus decided not to utilise the new "flexibility" and the extended possibilities to use temporary workers, but still in practice use the "old" and better wording of the law.

Currently the Norwegian trade union movement is in the middle of national collective agreement negotiations. In the new situation, with increasing unemployment and a downturn in the oil industry, expectations and demands are modest. Most unions seem to accept only a compensation of inflation, and some are even willing to give some minor concessions regarding more flexible working hours. A previously expected fight to improve a weak pension system, which was introduced by the red-green government about 10 years ago, seems to be postponed to a later date.

Finally, for more than two years a dispute has been going on among some dockworkers in Norway. Employers are obviously trying to get rid of dockers as defined by ILO Convention 137, and rather use seafarers and other, more "flexible" and "cheaper" workers to do the

job. Strikes (initial strikes and secondary actions) have been going on in a number of ports – so far without a result. The lack of ability to solve and win a small dispute like this is also a sign of weakness on the side of the central trade union apparatus in Norway. Recently, the President of the Norwegian Transport Workers' Union resigned in protest when a majority of the union's Executive Board demanded more offensive and militant actions to solve the problem. International support to the Norwegian dockers is highly appreciated.

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