

# TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

Country Study Denmark

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## INTRODUCTION

At a meeting held in June 2021, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) launched a [roadmap](#) for the trade unions with the explicit aim of building responses to the rise of the far-right. The document begins with these words:

*Trade unions and the far-right are opposites. Not only because of trade unions' history and proud tradition of opposing the far-right in past, but because of what trade unions stand for today. Trade unions, above all else, believe in solidarity: we seek better lives, social justice and opportunity, for all working people. We stand for unity over division.*

The statement is followed by a list of fifteen concrete actions that aim to combat the spread of populism and far-right positions within trade unions and society. The strategies include the mapping of the far-right at the workplace and in the public opinion; the incentivizing of internal communication and training, education, networking activities; and the promotion of alliance building and mutual learning. Concern about the growing electoral support for the far right in recent European elections was reiterated by ETUC president Laurent Berger, who warned:

*Without more dialogue between institutions, trade unions, and civil society, Europe will see chaos and the rise of the far-right,*

Adding to these words that:

*[...] Hungary, Poland, Italy, or even Sweden. The far-right comes out on top every time in elections, [although] Europe has never enjoyed freedom, equality and fraternity in extremist regimes*

Labour unions have over the past decades experienced the pressure of hyper-globalisation and de-industrialisation processes, the effects of economic and financial crises, the constant decline in party and union membership (Lehndorff/Dribbusch/Schulten 2018) and the rising electoral support for the radical right among workers (see Rydgren 2013; Salo/Rydgren 2021; Oesch/Rennwald 2018). The growing disaffection of the working class with labour union organisations and their general decline in influence are today highlighted by the scholarly literature in relation to a twofold transformation. On the one side, there has been a change in voters' political identification and voting preferences, particularly in terms of class-based alignment and support (Kitschelt 1994). On the other side, the role played by trade unions in their negotiations and bargaining strategies has narrowed and become more limited by sector (Dancygier/Walter 2015). On the top of these transformations, the multiple global crises that followed the 2008 Great Recession have reinforced workers' belief that uncertainty and risk are now permanent. National as well as transnational cycles of protests and mobilisations have responded to

the political and societal accelerations in society, either by deepening, or by narrowing the range of democratic opportunities (Della Porta 2013). Citizenship and democracy studies warn against the profound implications that the rising polarisation and distrust in democratic institutions might have on the very structures and the stability of liberal democracy (Crouch 2003; Krastev 2017; Levitsky/Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2022).

With the above backdrop in mind, we began to ask questions about the role the major trade unions play in today's Denmark; a context where the effects of the crises have been comparatively less harmful than elsewhere in Europe, but where the political influence of the populist right has been on the rise in the past decades (Meret 2021a, 2021b). Furthermore, the appeal that right-wing populism has for manual labourers raises questions about the kind of responses labour unions have been able to put up to tackle these issues over time. Apart from few sporadic studies (Rathgeb/Klitgaard 2022; Mosiman/Rennwald/Zimmerman 2019; Arndt/Rennwald 2016) the research within this field is still limited in Denmark. This is in contrast with other Scandinavian and Nordic countries, such as Sweden, where these issues have been more widely discussed (see e.g., Oskarson/Demker 2015; Neergaard 2017; Mulinari/Neergaard 2015) and are matter of specific focus and targeted activities. An example is the resolution [Crush Right-wing extremism!](#) (*Krossa högerextremismen!*) drafted at the Nordic Forum in the summer of 2021, which addressed the topic explicitly:

*The trade union movement must contribute to the fight against right-wing extremism by educating our own members. Right-wing extremists work across national borders and within the labour movement in the Nordic countries and Europe we need to start a network of activists who can exchange experiences and cooperate in the fight against these forces.*

## STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

Our study consists of three main sections. In the *first section* we introduce some of the main features characterising the Danish labour market model and the Danish political system. We examine in particular the development and consolidation of right-wing populism in the country. In the *second section*, we focus on the Danish labour unions, their history, organisation, membership, and on the role these play in Danish society today. Within this section we look at how union representatives formulate and perceive the challenges coming from the far right and how they understand the functions and responsibility of their union to contend with these. Our data consist of

semi-structured interviews conducted in August and September 2022 with fifteen trade union representatives of the three major Danish trade unions. We then consider the trade union strategies aimed at preventing the spreading of racism, discrimination and sexism. This encompasses trade unions' anti-racist, anti-discriminatory, and anti-sexist initiatives and campaigns, issues of trans-sectoral and transnational worker solidarity, and other relevant actions aimed at promoting inclusion, equality, and solidarity among members. *To conclude*, we strive to put forward a few recommendations for action, based on an assessment of the trade unions' experiences, but also on the ideas of how to counter extremism and exclusions that emerged during the interviews.

## MAIN FEATURES OF LABOUR MARKET AND POLITICAL SYSTEM IN DENMARK

### THE DANISH LABOUR MARKET MODEL AND ITS VOLUNTARY NATURE

Alongside with Sweden, Denmark is among the countries with the highest labour union density in Europe (Sjölander 2022). In Scandinavia, the labour movements have historically developed a close party-union relationship between the main trade union confederations and the Social Democratic Party. In Denmark, the labour movement originated as a single organisation, and only at a later stage the two realities formally parted.

Another main feature of the Danish labour market today is the degree of voluntary participation in collective bargaining supported by the *flexicurity* model (*flexibility* for employers, *security* for employees). It is a system that has been endorsed at a European level and framed as an innovative approach to labour market organisation and regulation (Klindt 2011). Hence, Denmark is a very interesting laboratory for an example of how labour unions have reacted to the electoral support for the populist right, growing immigration grievances, and welfare concerns in a context of (nationally) institutionalised workplace collaboration and collective bargaining.

The *flexicurity* model relies on high-quality working conditions and on regulated welfare security measures that can guarantee labour flexibility at comparatively lower insurance costs (Klindt 2011). In Denmark, employment and working conditions are traditionally and historically laid down by a collective bargaining negotiated between the trade unions and the employers' organisations (Rasmussen/Høgedahl 2021). This is per-

haps the most distinctive feature of the labour market conditions and agreements in the country (including Sweden and Norway), as it varies from labour market legislation in the rest of the EU. The arrangement is based on a main agreement (*Hovedaftale*) from the end of the nineteenth century. In short, the agreement infers that employer organisations shall recognise trade unions' right to collective bargaining, while the unions must recognise the employers' right to administer their company interests (Knudsen/Lind 2011). The Danish state still plays a significant role among the parties, albeit a less central one, when compared to other countries. Its function is mainly to mediate between the parties and to facilitate negotiations. This means that agreements between unions and employers take place through a rather elaborate institutional set-up arranged by the Labour Court (*Arbejdsretten*) and the three-part agreements, in which the government only intervenes on specific areas of wage, pension, and health-related matters (for instance with the state subsidised support packages under the COVID-19 global health emergency).

While employer organisations are primarily organised by the Confederation of Danish Employers (*Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening*; DA), the largest trade unions' umbrella association is the Trade Union Confederation (*Fagbevægelsens Hovedorganisation*; FH). This was established in 2019 through a merger of the former and historical Danish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen i Danmark*; LO) and the Confederation of Professionals in Denmark (FTF). The FH organises today about **1.2 million members** and it includes sixty-four different unions. Yet, despite such a centralised organ with a confederation representing different interests on each side of the negotiating table, collective bargaining has become increasingly decentralised since the late 1980s (Knudsen/Lind 2020: 383). Not only each union can negotiate its own collective agreement directly with the relevant companies, but bargaining can also take place between the local trade union department and local companies (Høgedahl 2021). For instance, The United Federation of Workers in Denmark (*Fagligt Fælles Forbund*; 3F) representing non-skilled and service workers, is comprised of sixty-four local departments spread all-over the country and each is said to be "sovereign", in the sense that it can make independent negotiations. In this respect, 3F seems to be the most decentralised of all Danish unions in the labour movement system.

In Denmark, about 66 per cent of the workforce is member of a trade union (Rasmussen/Høgedahl 2021) which is comparatively high, although the rates of unionisations have been decreasing since the 1990s. The country still has a deep-rooted welfare state system,

and a relatively strong Social Democratic party (25–26 per cent of the votes), whose history is strongly interrelated to the development of the labour movement. The party-union relationship was extremely close for more than a century, up until the 1990s (see Allern/Aylott/Christiansen 2007). This mutual relationship guaranteed representation in the respective executive organs, and sizable economic support was secured for the party by the union members. These structures were heavily disapproved of and came to an end in the first years of the Liberal and Conservative government, which was supported by the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*; DF). In 2002, the passage mentioning the affiliation with the Social Democratic Party was taken out from the confederation statute, ending the long historical and organisational bond between the two wings of the Danish labour movement. Structural transformations in the union membership and in the way political parties and unions organise urged this change, but in the Danish case this was also an outcome of the criticism from the DF of what they saw being the interdependence between the main trade union confederation and the Social Democratic Party.

Negotiation and bargaining power have changed over the past decades: Smaller companies can opt out from regulated agreements with trade unions, given that Danish collective agreements are not applicable *erga omnes*. Additionally, trade union membership and negotiating strength are today also affected by the flourishing of the so-called 'yellow' unions. In 2022, these encompassed about 400,000 of the unionised members. Yellow unions do not take direct part in collective bargaining and have contributed to the weakening of the negotiating power and workers' rights. The Danish model of voluntary and consensual agreement is thus exposed to accelerating societal and political developments, including: 1) The overall decline in trade union membership; 2) the increase of non-unionised migrant workers; and 3) the need to comply with the latest EU labour market legislation. It is perhaps a truism to avow that the Danish model is under increasing pressure, from inside and out, but it shows that the model, which has gained increased appreciation at the European level (Klindt 2011), has not remained unaffected by the crises and rapid transformations of the past decades. The Danish labour market model also plays a significant role in Danish politics as a symbol of both national Danish "exceptionalism" and as a marker of the comparatively high standard of living, state benefits, and higher trust usually associated with the Danish welfare state regime (Martela/Greve/Rothstein/Saari 2020). This has repercussions on the way trade unions explain and elaborate on their approach to nationalism, inclusion, and solidarity.

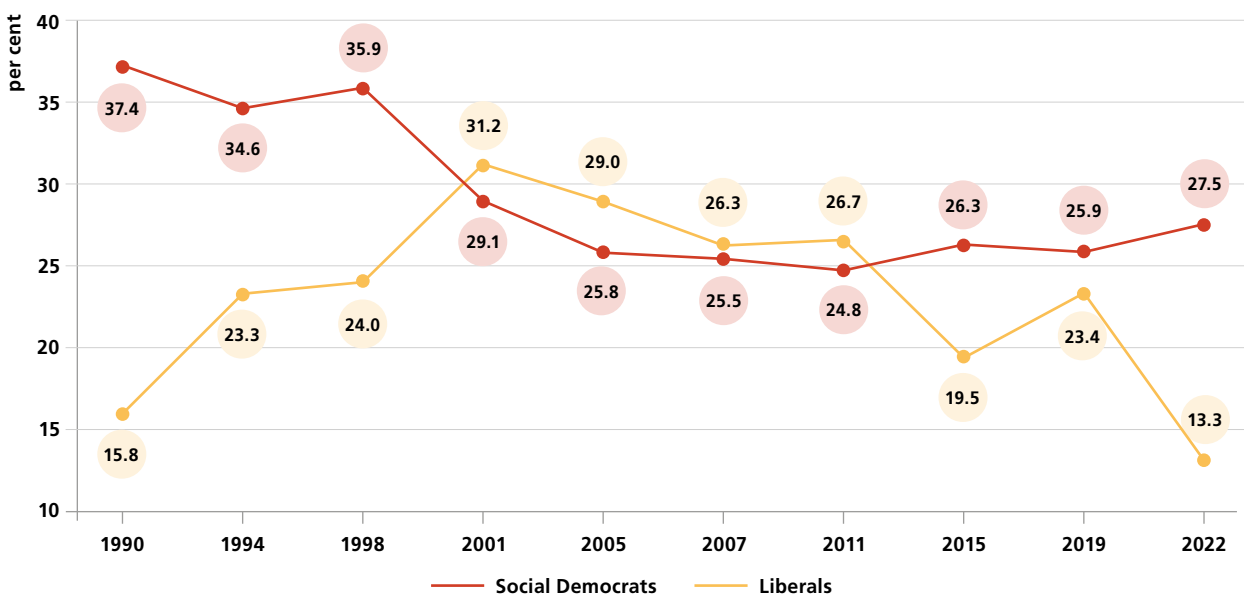
## THE DANISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

Compared to other countries in Europe, Denmark is still characterised by relative political stability and comparatively high levels of political and interpersonal trust (Sønderskov/Dinesen 2014). This is also reflected in the rather stable parliamentary democracy with a multiparty system and by the durability of the Danish minority governments. Denmark’s political system is otherwise similar to other Nordic countries in terms of taxation and public spending, corporatist traditions and interest groups, as well as for the

historical role played in the country by the Social Democratic Party. In the last decades, it has most often been the Social Democrats and the Liberal Party *Venstre* that have competed for the role as main governing party, having each their prime minister candidate in parliamentary elections.

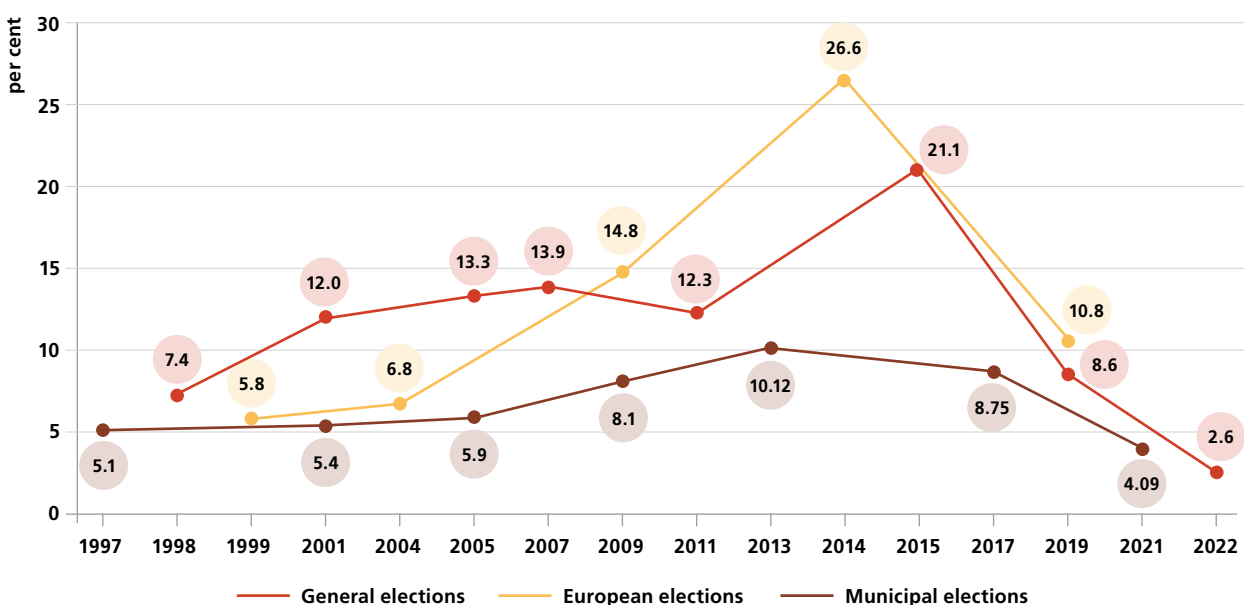
Right-wing populism gained electoral momentum in the 2000’s (Meret 2010) with the Danish People’s Party. The DF was established in 1995 by a splinter group coming from the anti-tax party, the Progress Party (*Fremskridtspartiet*) that in the years 1995–2012

Figure 1  
Social Democrats and Liberals electoral results (1990–2022)



Source: Meret 2021b (updated)

Figure 2  
Dansk Folkeparti (DF) electoral results (1997–2022)



Source: Meret 2021b (updated)



had Pia Kjøersgaard at its lead. Based on anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and welfare chauvinist positions, the DF exerted influence on Danish politics through the party's crucial role as a support partner for centre-right governments during the years 2001–2011 and 2015–2019. However, since their most successful election in 2015, where the party got 21.1 per cent of the votes, things have become rough for the DF. In 2019, the party's electoral support was halved, and the endeavours of former party leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl to regain his position remained unsuccessful.

After yet another disappointing electoral result in the November 2021 municipal elections, where the DF got only about 4 per cent of the vote, Kristian Thulesen Dahl decided to step down. This triggered inner-party divisions and ignited personal conflicts and internal dissent as for who should follow in the political leadership. The choice of Morten Messerschmidt as new party leader at the party convention in January 2022 was not approved by many of the DF MPs. Within a few months, more than half of the DF parliamentary group exited the party in protest. Eight of the former party MPs have since joined the Denmark's Democrats (*Danmarksdemokraterne*), which is a new right-wing populist party founded by former Liberal Inger Støjberg just before the elections. Støjberg served as Minister of Immigration and Integration in the years 2015–2019 and she was known for being a hard liner on migration, integration, and asylum. In 2021 she was sentenced 60 days in prison after an impeachment trial that found her guilty of forcibly separating asylum-seeking couples including individuals under 18 years of age.

The weakening of the Danish People's Party should not be unsophisticatedly interpreted as the decline of the populist demand or anti-immigration grievances among the electorate. It rather suggests a more nuanced set of explanations, including the repositioning on some issues in Danish politics. Both the Liberals and the Social Democrats have implemented several restrictive policies on asylum, immigration, and integration in the past decades. Moreover, two new right-wing populist parties have emerged on the political scene: The New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*; NB) and Denmark's Democrats (*Danmarksdemokraterne*; DD). Both parties bring forward anti-establishment, anti-immigration/anti-Islam, and welfare chauvinist positions, albeit in slightly varying political formats and approaches. Differences among them are mainly connected to the redistribution/economic programmatic dimension: Like the DF, the DD are more pro-welfare, whereas the New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*) supports ultra-liberal stances.

In the November 2022 parliamentary elections, the populist right (DF, DD, and NB) received a combined 14.7 per cent of the votes.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the DD, a new centre-right party, The Moderates, was launched by former Liberal PM Lars Løkke Rasmussen and entered Parliament with more than 9 per cent of the vote. Interestingly, The Moderates is a centre-seeking party that aims to break up so-called bloc parties and pursue agreements with the mainstream parties, leaving the radical left and right wings outside decision making and influence. This middle-seeking strategy was appreciated also by the Social Democrats, who have opened themselves up to opportunities in this direction in the post-election period to form a new government. Since both the Liberals and the Conservatives lost votes, it is likely that the interim PM Mette Frederiksen will use her mandate to achieve this.

In the context of Danish politics, it is worth mentioning the 'phenomenon' Rasmus Paludan and his attempts to gain notoriety and influence. The bigoted anti-Islam and anti-immigration leader has long rallied against immigration and Islam in both Denmark and Sweden, burning the Quran in urban areas with higher ethnic minority populations. Paludan advocates for the mass expulsion of immigrants, and of Muslims in particular, from Denmark. His stunts have not earned him any significant electoral support. In the 2019 elections, his party "Hard Line" (*Stram Kurs*) did not come above the 2 per cent threshold and in 2022, running as independent, he only got a total of 379 votes.

## DANISH TRADE UNIONS AND CHALLENGES POSED BY THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT

### A SHORT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Our analysis concentrates on the three main workers' trade unions in Denmark, with respect to number of registered members: The [Danish Metal-Workers' Union](#) (*Dansk Metal*, DM), the [United Federation of Workers in Denmark](#) (3F) and [The National Union of Commercial and Clerical Employees](#) (*Handle og Kontor*; HK).<sup>2</sup> Both DM and HK organise skilled workers in, for instance, office work and the retail business with regard to HK. 3F organises skilled and non-skilled

<sup>1</sup> This includes the Denmark Democrats (8.1 per cent), the Danish People's Party (2.6 per cent) and the New Right (3.7 per cent)

<sup>2</sup> 3F organises more than 260,000 workers. HK about 218,000 and DM 105,000. 3F and HK are the two largest trade unions in Denmark.

workers, primarily within industry, construction, and transport sectors. 3F is the largest trade union in Denmark in terms of members, with approximately 261,000 members. 3F is also the trade union that comparatively pays more attention to migrant workers amongst members, representatives, and employees. To give an example, the 3F's official website can be read in five different languages besides Danish: English, German, Polish, Russian, and Romanian. However, this does not necessarily indicate that there is internal agreement about the role of migrant workers in the Danish labour market or the way 3F ought to approach the question of labour, mobility, and migration.

The organisational history of the three trade unions goes back to the end of the nineteenth century. The Danish Trade Assistants' Union (*De Danske Handelsmedhjælperes Forbund*) was founded in 1897, as a precursor to the HK. 3F was first established in 2005, through the fusion of two unions organising unskilled and semi-skilled laborers, namely The Semi-skilled Workers' Union (*Specialarbejderforbundet*, SAF) and the Women Workers' Union (*Kvindeligt Arbejderforbund*, KAD). Until 1971, SAF was only for male workers, while KAD organised the female workers' section. The influential role of particularly SAF reached its climax when their leader, Anker Jørgensen, was appointed as leader of the Social Democrats in 1972, and Prime Minister in five different governments in the decade 1972–1982.

DM has been influential in a more indirect way, for instance by being the first major union that, together with the confederation CO-industry (*CO-industri*), introduced collective bargaining with the largest employer organisations at every new round of negotiations. This set a standard for every time a new round of collective bargaining commenced.<sup>3</sup> The HK was, until the end of the 1950's, a union mainly organising women workers, and it helped bringing the discussion of women's labour conditions and rights to the political agenda.

In terms of redistributive politics, the 3F is considered the most left-wing leaning of the three unions. This difference is also reflected in the fact that many of 3F's local branches still support traditional mainstream left-wing parties, while both DM and HK are today reluctant to display straightforward political preferences and support. When it comes to the political attitudes of the trade union members on issues concern-

ing, for instance, questions of national identity and immigration, or more specifically their support for radical right-wing populist parties, data are still limited.

## CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES – PERCEPTIONS AND REACTIONS

We interviewed fifteen trade union representatives from the 3F, DM, and HK who work in different levels of their organisation and are geographically spread over the country. Most interviewees lead their local union sections, which either cover a single municipality or a whole region. The interviews were semi-structured with questions clustered according to three main themes: 1) The relation between trade unions today and the radical right; 2) the trade union's approach to counter racism and discrimination; and 3) international relations and cooperation, particularly at the EU level. Additionally, several topics seemed to be of particular concern to most of the interviewees, which included the role of migrant workers from Eastern European countries and the directive on adequate minimum wages being currently negotiated in the EU. These issues were elaborated upon in detail during some of the interviews.

The perceptions of who is positioned on the radical right of Danish politics seems to have changed in the past decades, including among trade union representatives. To some degree, the normalisation of populist positions, for instance, on migration and asylum question has likely affected trade unionists' views about who belongs to the populist and radical right in today's Denmark. Certainly, things have changed from 1998, when Social democratic PM Poul Nyrup declared in his [address to the parliament opening](#) that in his eyes “the Danish People's Party will never become *salonfähig*”. For many of those interviewed, it is reasonable and appropriate to politically cooperate with the Danish People's Party. When asked about his perception of the increased popularity of the far-right in Denmark, 3F union organiser Jakob Mathiassen mentions for instance “Hard Line” (*Stram Kurs*), as an example of the extreme positions some of his colleagues now might sympathise with, which can be seen as problematic. Ole Kjær, representative of the HK section in Southern Jutland and a member of the Social Democrats, distinguishes between the Danish People's Party and the “other parties on the far right”. He further observes that DF MPs have a pragmatic approach to politics and that they support the Danish welfare state and social security policies. This, in his view, makes the DF appear “less problematic than other parties”. The Danish People's Party is today considered an acceptable political referent, compared to other parties.

<sup>3</sup> It is most likely not an accident that the current leader of Dansk Metal, Claus Jensen, was found to be the most powerful person in the whole country through a network analysis of the Danish “power elite” elaborated by Christoph Houman Ellersgaard, Anton Grau Larsen, and Sarah Steinitz in 2016.

In other words, the trade union considers the DF a suitable interlocutor, despite the party's ethnonationalism and anti-immigration views.

Jesper Thorup, leader of the HK-section in Eastern Jutland, deems Hard Line and The New Right as 'extreme right-wing', yet the Danish People's Party is not mentioned as belonging to this category.

*But the Danish People's Party [...] they are an interesting case, you know, in the sense that if it were not for their positions on immigration, they agree with us on most matters. The Danish People's Party is sometimes easier to agree with than some of the governing parties.*

This approach is also the result of decades of normalisation of right-wing populism in the country (Meret 2021b). Nowadays, the focus upon cultural and ethnic background and the framing of non-Western and Muslim immigrants as a problem for integration and social cohesion are also propositioned by the mainstream parties. Besides, the DF "reputational shield" (Ivarsflaten 2006) and the party positioning on welfare might have helped to the process of acceptance. Yet, this can seem a bit at odds with trade union's emphasis on the "everybody is to be welcomed" principle, that is: regardless of ethnic origin, race, sexual orientation, or religion. International solidarity is in fact still perceived as an important guiding principle among trade unionists, although this commitment seems less concrete when discussing who they perceive as radical and populist challengers to these positions.

Most of the trade unionists we interviewed did not perceive their members' support or sympathy for radical right-wing populist parties to be a matter of concern. For Christina Madsen Kristiansen, Head of HK in Northern Jutland, the fact that HK needs to represent a broader segment of workers within the clerical and retail sector implies that they also include members who might vote for parties and standpoints not in line with the policies and positions supported by the HK. Their political attitudes and behaviour are seen as a private matter. However, Kristiansen also recognises that HK and the other trade unions should better explain and clarify to their members the need to distinguish between their private political opinions and preferences from HK's official stance and requirements. The challenge for the trade union is thus to unequivocally and adamantly advocate for gender equality, anti-sexism, and anti-discrimination position that are based on cultural, racial, ethnic, or religious differences, while at the same time still being able to encompass different political positions and

standpoints among the members of the union. According to Anthony Sylvester, a 3F Copenhagen-based trade union consultant on migrant labour, this tension entails the need to foster more dialogue among the members, to disclose differences, tensions, and conflicts instead of trying to censor or avoid them. Yet, neither Sylvester nor the other trade union representatives we interviewed indicated whether the unions actively try to develop and sustain dialogue among members with different political approaches and opinions, for instance about immigration and migrant workers.

The lack of concrete initiatives and actions on how to cope with the spreading of radical right-wing positions among unionised workers is perhaps connected to the idea that supporters of the radical and populist right parties are not particularly active in trade unions, or that they do not see their trade union as an advocate of inclusiveness, anti-discrimination, or democracy. As Ole Kjær observes, radical right-wing members are more likely to perceive their trade union's role as their personal 'insurance ticket', which provides a specific service (for which they pay for) in case of labour conflicts and wage regulation. These members do not see trade unions as actors that should stand for anti-discrimination and social justice. In this sense, Kjær means that these members are not more likely to engage with their trade union than they do with their bank or their local supermarket. They buy a service they might need at some point, and do not engage further than the required monthly membership fee. But as Jesper Thorup points out, such different perceptions of the role of one's trade union can produce a deep internal divide between the active and 'silent' members of the union. If it is true that European trade unions must conceive themselves as "communities of values" that counter right-wing extremism, as Richard Stöss claims (Stöss 2017: 42), it is clearly a problem that a growing part of the members conceive the trade union as neither a community nor a place of value but a service provider for the benefit of the individual paying customers.

During our interviews, issues of racism and ethnic discrimination are also discussed as minor problems for trade unions, compared, for instance, to the constant pressure that the exploitation of migrant workers in Denmark wields on the survival of the Danish labour and welfare model. This does not entail that trade unionists mean that these issues are negligible in Danish society as such, but they do not see this as the primary reason for why immigrants can be abused and exploited. The problem is not so much discrimination, but rather the poor working conditions of the workers coming from Poland, Romania, and the Phil-



ippines, creating a backlash on the Danish model and stability. In this sense, it is social dumping that is the main concern.

Some of the trade unionists interviewed also mentioned that they understand why manual labourers might sympathise with the radical right. The main explanation behind this can be exemplified by a “dissatisfaction theorem”: voters’ and thus workers’ opinions and attitudes are not formed independently, but they arise as a reaction to a loss of status and out of fear for their security on the labour market. This is particularly noticeable amongst the trade union representatives in 3F, which organises most of the unskilled workers within sectors such as transport, agriculture, and construction, where workers with a migrant background today often outnumber Danish workers. Yet, there is sparse elaboration or reflection about why it is that such dissatisfaction and perceived threat transforms into a nationalistic response and not, for instance, toward a demand for a restructuring of the workplace and a stronger unionisation and socialisation of the workers within same sector or locale. In this respect, it is interesting to note that when, for instance, Jakob Mathiassen speaks of the “local workers” and/or the “local working class,” he specifically means ethnically Danish and white workers.

## COUNTERING THE RADICAL RIGHT

Even though several of our interviewees argue that unions are historically internationalist in their advocacy and perspective, and that they should remain so, nationalism in a Danish context is still accepted as an unescapable political framework for trade unions, also in view of the Danish model and its prized “exceptionalism”. This means that even though the need for more European and transnational cooperation amongst trade unions is seen as indispensable, or to put it with Anthony Sylvester’s words that “we are already more European citizens than we think”, several trade unionists still advocate the need to contain these developments so as not to cause backlashes during the transition. Jakob Mathiassen argues, for instance, that were Danish trade unions to suddenly drop “welfare chauvinism” and advocate for time and resources to be invested in global struggles, workers would withdraw their trade union membership and the Danish model would succumb.

According to Mathiassen: “what the trade union movement really does, which can restrain right wing populism, is to take the edge off the globalisation tsunami”. In this sense, it is important for trade unions to try to stem the tide of radical right populism, by mak-

ing sure that the ‘tsunami’ of migrant workers and foreign companies in the country does not undermine Danish working conditions, bargaining traditions, and privileges. Jakob Mathiassen speaks of a general sentiment and concern amongst many of the trade union representatives that some control and regulation of migration is necessary to address radical right-wing tendencies in the public opinion and their members. However, with this perspective they also risk positioning themselves in the liminal space between two contrasting argumentative stances: On the one hand, the idea that it is the number of migrant workers that trigger competition and the ‘race to the bottom’ in the labour market and, on the other hand, the principle that everybody is welcome no matter where they come from. This approach is perhaps a pragmatic appraisal of the primacy of nationalist interests amongst Danish workers. In order to organise and mobilise towards international solidarity, trade unions need to pragmatically accept a strategic nationalist protectionism, to paraphrase Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1984) ‘strategic essentialism’, that is: To embrace a pragmatic approach to achieve higher political goals.

Understanding and recognising the role that trade unions play in an increasingly globalised and transnationally organised world requires knowledge and education about both national and international/global developments and contexts. This is not to be taken for granted for labour union members and perhaps can explain the “lack of logics” inherent in supporting radical right wing and populist stances and policies, as Ole Kjær seems to suggest:

*The whole labour movement has always been internationalist rather than nationalist. There has been a divide in that sense. But [this role] is not given the importance that in reality it should have, in my opinion. You know, it is like when you hear [the song] “When I see a red flag billow on a shiny, fresh, spring day” [a famous Danish labour movement song from 1923] too many people still get to picture in their minds the Danish flag, you see. But it is not! It is the red banner of the labour struggle.*

Along similar lines, Jan Overgaard Gregersen, leader of Dansk Metal in Aalborg, claims that radical right-wing populism offers “easy solutions to complex problems”, but avoids proposing realistic and long-term policy changes and alternatives. Gregersen sees social media as loudspeakers for an oversimplified vision of world. Facebook has for instance become “the fools’ paradise” for public debate. Yet, such a critical perspective might also buoy inaction if radical right supporters are perceived as being too uneducated to understand the complexity of today’s society.



Nevertheless, lack of knowledge can be countered by education. Ole Madsen, leader of Dansk Metal in the municipality of Himmerland, strongly believes that it is possible to educate supporters of the radical right opposing fake news about, for instance, criminality rates among ethnic minorities, and by arranging meetings between radical right-wing supporters and members with migrant background.

*The best strategy is first of all education. And if we can manage to also organise the new Danes, because many are still not members of the union, and do not participate in the various activities we organise and what we otherwise offer. To meet each other can strongly contribute to breaking down prejudices.*

Madsen here refers to his own personal experience about the importance of befriending people with immigration backgrounds to challenge views and stereotypes about non-natives. Yet, contesting radical right-wing prejudices and stigmatisation can also be a strategy that yields positive results:

*We must also be better [at informing] our members [...] Not that we should be afraid, or critical or anything, but when there are these [anti-immigrant] allegations coming from the right wing, we should ask them to provide evidence for [their statements] because I think that there are an awful lot of undocumented allegations in the media nowadays.*

The lack of a critical perspective and reflection of the implications that relate to a nationalist approach to the Danish model and to Danish “exceptionalism” can be difficult to reconcile with international solidarity and action. Ultimately, how can international solidarity among Danish and foreign workers be achieved considering this approach seems to set limits to working-class solidarity beyond borders? Why does this issue remain unaddressed among trade unionists? In this respect, the strategy towards the radical right challenges in Denmark seems to ignore rather than to confront the type of nationalism and populism that Danish radical right-wing populism stands for and has elaborated upon during the past decades. For instance, trade unions such as 3F and DM have run campaigns and lobbied politically against the European Commission’s proposal for a directive on adequate minimum wages. Their core arguments are not necessarily nationalistic, in the sense that they are protecting a labour market model with voluntary agreements instead of bounding these to a formalised legislation, which is a model that does not only work in Denmark. Yet, as Jakob Mathiassen argues in relation to his own union, these campaigns are predominantly focused on the potential threat and harm that

such a directive might do to Danish workers, while the potential benefits this would bring for workers in the other EU countries remains unstated. Trade unions do not seem to critically address the implication that this strategy and rhetoric, on the one hand, supports the Danish model, and on the other thus ends up strengthening ethnonationalist and welfare chauvinist positions and, perhaps indirectly, also the radical right Eurosceptical agenda.

In Denmark, the reference to the trade union movement in the singular (*fagbevægelsen*) signals that there is a certain alignment among Danish trade unions in terms of interests, demands, claims, and campaigns. That the Danish Trade Union Confederation now organises 1.3 million trade union members from different unions clearly evinces that there is an alignment at institutional level. Yet, at the ideological level, differences remain, for instance between 3F and DM, whose understanding of Danish nationalism and interests on the question of migrant workers differs. In this regard, 3F representatives tend to emphasise the importance of international solidarity more than HK and particularly DM. Even though they also directly criticised the EU directive on minimum wages, their reasons for being so critical are not quite the same. For instance, in their “[fact sheet](#)” about the EU minimum wage, the 3F carefully acknowledges that many EU workers live in condition of precarity, underpayment, and exploitation, before arguing that this cannot be properly solved by law. According to 3F, the Danish model should become the European model. In contrast to this, the leader of Dansk Metal, Claus Jensen, published several critical letters and posts on the EU directive, arguing that it threatens the Danish model. These communications did not mention the conditions of workers in the rest of Europe, who cannot rely on a similar model.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Danish trade unions are, at least to some degree, nationalistic in their focus and approach to protecting the Danish model and in their prioritisation of collective bargaining for the Danish labour market. Yet, this approach suffers from an ambivalent nationalism in constant tension with solidarity beyond borders and with what this means for the migrant workers within the EU space. Overemphasising Danish exceptionalism might have unanticipated effects on the trade union movement’s inclusion and solidarity. It is not only about Denmark but also about crossing borders and fighting for workers’ rights internationally.

The scholarly literature distinguishes between different strategies that mainstream parties may resort to

in countering the radical right (Heinze 2018; Bale et al. 2010; Downs 2001; Meguid 2005). They can choose to disengage from the radical right by ignoring, blocking, or perhaps even demonising their political opponents. On the other hand, they may also choose to engage the radical right by either confronting them in an adversarial way or rather by collaborating and adopting some of their policies. Even though trade unions are different political actors than parties, they can also draw from similar strategies when reacting to the radical right and populist challenges. In the case of Danish trade unions, it is difficult to pinpoint straightforward strategies – this is perhaps because there is a lack of a cohesive strategy. Trade unions oscillate between a range of strategies, that include ignoring that some of their trade union members may sympathise with the radical right. Trade union representatives also express a dismissal and demonisation of the radical right as inefficient and rabid. Interestingly, however, it is the shifting positions that characterise the trade unions approach: Positions avowing that trade unions should go into dialogue with supporters of the radical right is mentioned soon after or just before the idea that radical right supporters are “ill-informed and misguided”. In this sense, Danish trade unions advocate a dismissive and a collaborate strategy which reflect an ambivalent approach to the radical right, or at least discloses a lack of a thoroughly discussed and planned strategy.

This differs from the mainstream parties’ reactions in Denmark, which have adopted co-option of anti-immigration discourses in particular (Heinze 2018: 293). Except for the more extremist *Stram Kurs*, which failed to be elected to Parliament in 2019, the *cordon sanitaire* has never been considered a viable option. The lack of a clear strategy among Danish trade unions needs to be considered within the broader Danish political landscape, where radical right-wing populism has increasingly been normalised. In this sense, it does not seem entirely clear which political actors the trade unions must be aware of when developing strategies against radical right-wing populism. Since mainstream parties such as the Social Democrats but also the Liberals and the Conservatives have moved towards nationalist and arguably populist directions, it would come with a political cost for trade unions to openly advocate for international and cross-border solidarity. Being more internationalist would probably reduce their political influence considerably.

Furthermore, Danish trade unions have changed their self-understanding over the past decades. Since the beginning of 2000’s, most Danish trade unions decided to abolish economic support to the left-wing parties. For instance, HK stopped their annual support to

the Social Democrats in 2005, 3F did the same in 2007, although local departments may still provide support for specific political activities organised by the left-wing. Among our interviewees, this is reflected in an overall shift towards a looser cooperation with the Social Democrats. René Nielsen, deputy chairman in Dansk Metal, emphasises that this is not a “disengagement”, at least for DM, since they still advocate for a Social Democratic government as the one which best serves the interests of their workers. According to Nielsen, it is rather an expression of a reversal in the accentuation among trade unionists on how to conceive their role in society. When Nielsen began as leader of Metal *Hovedstaden* (“Metal Capital”) in 2007, one’s identity as a unionist was “more political than professional”, but this relationship slowly shifted over the years so that political identity and belonging faded more and more into the background. Representing a certain profession, and thereby a large group of workers with specific interests on the labour market, began to matter more than whether an elected representative was a member of the Social Democrats.

According to Richard Hyman (2001), it is possible to distinguish between three ideal types of European trade unionism: 1) Trade unions as interest organisations with primarily labour market functions; 2) trade unions as platforms for raising workers’ status in society more generally; and 3) trade unions as “schools of war” in a potentially revolutionary struggle between labour and capital (Hyman 2001: 1–2). Danish trade unions do not simply perceive themselves as belonging to the first category, where political involvement is to be kept outside of the labour market. Instead, they perceive of the political developments in Denmark as being dynamic, in the sense that shifting interlocutors from different parties can enhance opportunities to advance the workers’ interests on the labour market.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the perspective associated with this approach that understands trade unions mainly as interest organisations with labour market functions, does seem to play a stronger and stronger role in today’s Denmark. In this regard, it has become easier to dismiss the rising influence and consequences of the populist and radical right, as long as this is not perceived to directly and negatively affect labour market regulations and labour interests and achievements. As several interviewees emphasise, they are aware of radical and populist right-wing tendencies on, for instance, social media and in different youth subcultures, but they do not know of any exam-

<sup>4</sup> Given that the idea of the Danish model presupposes a basic agreement between workers and employers and thereby a cessation of class struggle as an ‘either-or’ antagonism, Danish trade unions are definitely not “schools of war”.

ples of such tendencies arising in ways that are directly relatable to the workplace. This, however, could also be understood as a sign of broader acceptance, particularly since political standpoints and core beliefs have faded into the background.

## BEST PRACTICES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The influence of radical right populism in Denmark has also to do with labour market developments and thereby with the way Danish trade unions react to such trends, discourses, and political (or paradigm) changes, whether this concerns newly arrived refugees seeking asylum and employment, or the discussion about the minimum wage and Denmark's role in the European Union. As emerges from our interviews, Danish trade union representatives still believe that their interests and political demands are best represented by left-wing parties. Therefore, Danish trade unions have different reasons for developing a more coherent and ambitious strategy to counter the spread of radical and populist attitudes and positions; this not only because they disagree with the ethnonationalist-populist agenda, but also because this agenda 'steals' voters that might otherwise go to the left-wing.

But how to go about with this task? Can trade unions in other countries learn from each other's strategies, ideas and experiences? Is it possible to create a list of strategies that takes into account different contexts, history, and welfare developments? As we have seen, Danish trade unions are more focused on engaging in dialogue and cooperation with available political actors. They privilege consensus rather than having to set-up a *cordon sanitaire*, or emphasise 'unbridgeable' differences. Many interview respondents expressed hope that they would be able to engage with, listen to, and understand those who sympathise with the radical right. This can be done and mediated through *ad hoc* educational activities and dialogue that can help mobilising engagement and participation and show that perceived identity and cultural differences prevent the achievement of common goals for people working in similar sectors. Several interviewees recognise, however, the difficulty of reaching out to those members. Social media could provide an opportunity for union members and union representatives to meet, express their opinions, and start to dialogue with each other, providing this happens in a moderated setting. There are several online platforms trade unions could purposely use to engage members in a discussion respectful of differences, ethics, and conduct.

The strategy that Danish labour unions to a certain degree already pursue is to defuse the salience of is-

issues that are typically dominated by the radical right, particularly in the public perception. Enhanced focus on social and economic justice for workers and on the relationship between macroeconomic processes and identity formation (Stankov 2022) could allow trade unions to reduce the saliency of questions focussed on nationality, homogeneity and cohesion, cultural differences, and/or religion. At the moment, unionists do not seem to ask themselves how they themselves may contribute to the framing of political issues and identity formation. For instance, how do they persuade workers that social class is just as important, if not more important, than their perceived belonging and identity? In this regard, a reflection on the content and implications of populist and nationalist positions within the union could be a fruitful way where to start. Trade unions such as 3F and HK offer to their representatives' courses on what racism, discrimination, and sexism are about and how it is possible to detect and counteract the spreading of prejudices, racism, and discrimination in the workplace. Given that ethnonationalist and protectionist views constitute the ideology of the Danish radical right, it would also be worth discussing whether courses on what nationalism is about and how it connects to globalisation processes should be included as a core component of trade union educational curriculum. This could help enhance the contact and exchange with other trade unions in Europe (and beyond) and possibly help to reframe the understanding of the Danish model within an increasingly international setting.

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