

Cop-enhagen: Preemptive Mass Arrests in Context of History of Danes' Movement

Contributed by David Rovics
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"Copenhagen police ended up preemptively arresting nearly a thousand people Saturday. Another 230 protesters were preemptively arrested on Sunday during a demonstration to block the city's ports." - Dec. 14, Democracy Now

The signs up all over the airport and various places elsewhere in town are calling it Copenhagen, but everybody I know is calling it Cop-enhagen, which seems far more appropriate. The international media have been giving this lots of coverage, and rightly so.

Of course much of the media is unable to walk and chew gum at the same time, so other things, such as the reason the protests are happening in the first place, can get lost.

Inside the Bella Center lots of stuff is going on. Namely the US, Australia and others leading the way in making sure nothing meaningful takes place there, while many other delegates and activists within try to make the best of it, or at least make the effort to thoroughly expose the bankruptcy of the position taken by the rich countries. The center itself is divided into floors where the big decisions are being made, and then the rest of the place for the little people, the delegates from unimportant countries like Tuvalu, representatives of small NGOs and other riffraff. Many of the folks involved with the process inside are dividing their time between the meetings and events outside in the streets and at the alternative conference going on elsewhere in town.

Copenhagen is a beautiful city. The architecture in the heart of the city is understated but exudes the wealth of a place that was once the capital of a fairly sizeable empire. Of course, though the Danish empire brought some riches home to Copenhagen, the wealth of modern Denmark is far greater, that being the product not so much of empire but of the Danish labor movement and Danish social democracy. It is this check on Danish capitalism that has allowed this wealth to be so impressively distributed, bringing Denmark a quality of life that is the envy of most anyone who knows about it.

Of course, as in any society there are different forces at work in Denmark. Most Danes would identify much more with those peasants who rebelled in the 17th century and helped pave the way for modern Denmark, not with the soldiers who massacred them, but those soldiers were also Danes. Most Danes would prefer to remember the heroic stories of resistance during the occupation of Denmark in the 1940's, but there were also many enthusiastic collaborators.

At so many points in history there are pivotal moments when things can go different ways, and something pushes events in a certain direction. The direction of social democracy has been the ascendant one in Denmark for quite some time, but this was able to happen for a variety of reasons – the strength and purpose of the Danish labor movement, the fear on the part of the rich of the spectre of communism, the moral bankruptcy of the leaders of society who collaborated with the Nazis after the war, and so on.

If people know anything about this most southerly of the Scandinavian countries they know it's full of windmills. Germany actually has lots more windmills than Denmark, but many of them are made in Denmark anyway, at the Vespas factories in Jutland (where they recently laid off thousands of workers).

There's a reason Denmark has been a pioneer in windmill technology, and it is, to a large extent, the Danish environmental movement. In the early 70's the Danish government was thinking about building their first nuclear reactor, following the example of Sweden, which has one right across the water, upwind. People inspired by ideas of communal living and experiential learning formed a community centered around a Free School near the little village of Ulfborg and began making plans to build the world's largest windmill. Over the course of three years, working with scientists, artisans and large numbers of hippies, they built the world's largest windmill. They refused to patent any of their ground-breaking technology, making it all available for anybody to use. Their windmill, still standing and providing power to the community 35 years later, is the prototype for the big windmills you'll see scattered around Denmark and the world.

This windmill provided more than just energy – it and the movement that built it provided political capital. Those in parliament arguing for a nuclear reactor lost the fight, and Denmark became a nation of windmills.

For the past decade or so, however, Denmark has been run by a coalition led by the neoliberal, xenophobic Vestre party. They have been privatizing hospitals and passing some of the most restrictive immigration legislation in the world. They have had troops in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and they have been forcibly deporting refugees back to these war-torn countries. Fueled by the changes to Danish society wrought by EU membership, this conservative coalition keeps winning elections. Along with a love of capitalism and a fear of foreigners, these people also can't stand hippies or punks or other dissenting elements, and they are on a quest to "normalize" the 900-person intentional community in the heart of Copenhagen known as Christiania. To that end they conducted a police raid early one morning in 2007 and destroyed a house they deemed to have been illegally constructed. (I got my first taste of Danish tear gas there a couple hours later.)

Shortly before this home demolition in Christiania, hundreds of Danish police had landed on the five-story squatted social center known as Ungdomshuset ("Youth House") by helicopter early one morning. They fumigated the place with tear gas, arrested those inside, jailed them for several months, and proceeded to follow the new government policy of destruction of the house. Masked construction workers from Poland did the dirty work, since Danish unions forbid their members from doing work that requires police protection.

Over the course of the next 1-1/2 years, however, the government was forced to backtrack on their plan to civilize Denmark. The movement to support Ungdomshuset grew dramatically, involving a number of fairly significant riots and probably more importantly a weekly drill of marches every Thursday for a year and a half, involving many hundreds and often thousands every week. Eventually the chief of police and the mayor of Copenhagen had to admit that their policies had been a mistake and they gave the movement what it was demanding, a new house, bought and paid for by the city. (Leftwing foundations had offered to buy a new building for the movement but these offers were refused on principle – the line was that the government destroyed Ungdomshuset and they should replace it with something comparable.)

In the course of the riots and demonstrations around Ungdomshuset the police preemptively arrested hundreds of people on a few occasions. They weren't technically allowed to do this, but they came up with excuses. One eyewitness told me that the police started arresting people, claiming some of them were throwing rocks at them, although the rock-throwing had clearly started only after the police began arresting the assembled crowd.

A new law was passed in preparation for the climate summit which makes this kind of mass preemptive arrest perfectly legal – all the police need to do is arbitrarily determine that an area is designated as a "riot zone" and then they can arrest whoever they want. Any non-Danes arrested can be held for 40 days (including people who were born in Denmark but are not citizens, a reality for many here that may seem surprising to those in the US reading this). It went into effect a week before last Thursday, and since then the Danish police have carried out mass preemptive arrests that dwarf anything they've done before. They don't even need to pretend they had any justification for what is essentially collective punishment.

Those of you from the US reading this should be familiar with preemptive mass arrests. If you haven't had your head in the sand for the past few decades then you know this happens regularly at demonstrations throughout our great democracy. But it's new for Denmark, and it is a serious step in the direction of the Americanization, you could say, of the country. Being an American, I can say first-hand that emulating US policies in terms of law enforcement or in terms of the privatization and outsourcing of industry is all a very bad idea, at least as far as the vast majority of people are concerned – but the interests of a privileged minority are what moves people like the Danish Prime Minister, not the interests of society as a whole.

The policies and concerns of the new Danish government were represented eloquently by the kettling and mass arrest of a small march that was en route to commit acts of civil disobedience at the docks run by the Maersk corporation. Maersk is one of the world's richest men and runs one of the world's biggest shipping companies (look for his name, it's everywhere). Blockading docks is illegal, of course, and under the normal legal procedures in a democratic society people committing such acts would be told to stop and after a certain amount of time arrested, fined, brought to trial or whatever. Yesterday, however, as with the day before, hundreds of people were preemptively arrested, including many who had no intention of committing any illegal acts, such as one reporter for the Times of London.

I narrowly avoided being arrested two days ago. Of those arrested the overwhelming majority had nothing to do with the rock-throwing incident at the stock exchange that apparently set off the police action. The overwhelming majority didn't even know anything had happened at the stock exchange. All they knew was they were suddenly, randomly being arrested while taking part in a permitted march organized in part by the very mainstream Social Democratic Party. This was a family march involving tens of thousands of people with no civil disobedience or other illegal acts planned as part of it.

The new law may allow for mass preemptive arrests, but international treaties which Denmark has signed called the Geneva Conventions outline certain guidelines for the treatment of detainees which were clearly violated by the Danish police. People were handcuffed in uncomfortable positions for many hours on the frozen pavement, not allowed to move, not allowed to go to the toilet. Some fainted, many wet their pants, adding to the danger posed by the freezing temperatures. Elderly people were arrested along with teenagers. Anne Feeney's husband Juli, a 66-year-old Swede who had been slowly walking beside a carriage, was handcuffed and made to sit on the frozen ground. Among the marchers from Tvind, the Free School movement with whom I was walking, those arrested include headmasters and teachers from throughout Europe and Africa. Every one of the Norwegians I had just been hanging out with the day before from Trondheim were arrested.

I participated in a march that was very quickly thrown together involving several hundred people, starting near the Valby train station and going to the prison to which most detainees had been brought. The police surrounded (escorted?) us and seemed to be thinking about arresting all of us, but apparently ultimately thought better of it. Instead they informed us as we were marching towards the prison that most of those detained had just been released, and that we were welcome to march to the prison but no further.

Outside the prison – a temporary prison that used to be a brewery -- I heard more stories of how the Anarchist Black Cross representatives who had been attempting to provide soup and solace to people as they were being released were told to leave the premises. When they attempted to set up at the train station a kilometer away they were again told to leave. So as most people left the prison there wasn't even anyone to meet them and tell them where to find the train station. Most detainees were at no point given any food by the police. After six hours some had been given water.

Tonight after Naomi Klein, Lisa Fithian and others from Climate Justice Action held a meeting at the Big Tent in Christiania hundreds of police and dozens of police vehicles were involved in more or less laying siege to Christiania, which was defended, as in the past, by hundreds of masked, black-clad young people making burning barricades and throwing large numbers of bottles at the police, who then fired lots of tear gas. Tonight the police reportedly used a water cannon to extinguish the main burning barricade and arrested 200. Most of this happened while Anne Feeney and I were playing a concert in the Opera House, not far from the main entrance.

The future is not written. There was nothing inevitable about Denmark building a nuclear reactor, and because of the environmental movement it built windmills instead. Equally, there is nothing inevitable about Denmark becoming a neoliberal police state. The years ahead in Denmark -- and more broadly in the rest of Europe, run increasingly by pro-business and xenophobic governments -- will determine in which direction things will go. And perhaps the next few days will be a particularly important moment in that process.

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less controlled borders to Denmark
and also warnings against the more controlled border crossings.

Global Day of Action on climate change, courtesy Indymedia Denmark

mass arrest photos

Using Controversial Law, Danish Police Preemptively Arrest Over 1,000 Protesters Dec. 14

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