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Belgium

The March 22 attacks and their shadows

- Debate - Paris, Brussels, responding to the attacks -

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“It has happened”. Many Brussels inhabitants experienced that feeling on March 22, 2016, when terrorist attacks struck the capital of Belgium, inasmuch as people had been prepared for it. In November 2015 already, the famous lockdown of Brussels, when the city was declared in a state of alert and under an “imminent” threat by the government and intelligence services, had halted all life for four long days, a real dress rehearsal for a state of emergency.

Since then, the military has colonized the streets of the Belgian capital as well as those of other large cities such as Antwerp. The whole world was also aware of the role played by Belgium for several authors and suspects of terrorist attacks in recent years in Europe. And those who were closely following international news knew that since November 13, 2015, attacks claimed by Daesh had multiplied from Turkey to Iraq, passing by Tunisia, Libya or Egypt.

The attacks in Brussels came with perfect timing to relaunch the widespread feeling of fear in the city, just a few days after the arrest of Salah Abdeslam, one of the main suspects of the attacks in Paris. An arrest which was glorified by the Liberal Prime Minister Charles Michel and the Minister of the Interior Jan Jambon (N-VA, Flemish nationalists), in a selfie with soldiers. If new evidence was needed that the “terrorism” strategy pursued by the Belgian Government has been a failure, then March 22 has provided it in a manner both tragic and spectacular. The soldiers present at Zaventem and in the subway were unable to do anything to prevent the attacks. The security show orchestrated by the Liberal-nationalist coalition has resulted in a dramatic fiasco.

Something rotten in the state of Belgium...

So why did Daesh choose to hit the airport and the metro in Brussels? The economic impact of the attack on the airport at Zaventem, and the psychological effect of an explosion in the subway in the heart of a European neighbourhood combine with the symbol of Brussels as international city, European and multicultural capital. In addition, Belgium participates in the international coalition against Daesh in Iraq, and it is also the European country most affected, in relation to its population, by departures to Syria: more than 500 Belgians have left, mostly to join Daesh, though some have joined Al Nusra (Al Qaeda).

The reasons for these departures are multiple and complex, of course, and Belgium is far from being the only country affected. But like its neighbours, it provides a fertile ground for the growth of these sectarian gangs. The physical distance between the rich and the poor, or between whites and ethnic minorities, is much less in Brussels than in the large French cities. But the descendants of Moroccan and Turkish immigrants, who arrived in the 1960s as a result of bilateral treaties answering the Belgian bourgeoisie’s need for labour, and which form the major part of the 700,000 Muslims in the country, are suffering racist discrimination and Islamophobia.

Brussels, the most multicultural city in Belgium, is at the same time the economic lung and the poor parent. The figures are eloquent: one inhabitant in five in the region of Brussels is without work, while the official rate for Belgium is 8.5%. One Brussels inhabitant in three is poor. Social selection is rampant in a school system that operates as a market and where Catholic education, funded by the state but under private management, accounts for half the system. The weight of this Catholic pillar is also manifest each year during the national festival when the Prime Minister and King attend the Catholic Te Deum ceremony. This makes even more obvious the purpose of politicians and editorial writers who agitate on “secularism” and in particular the veil, drawing on the Islamophobic obsessions

which have had some success among our neighbours: stigmatizing and discriminating against Muslims.

The number of schools where the wearing of the headscarf is still allowed has been reduced to almost zero and the wearing of the niqab was prohibited initially in Molenbeek, at the time led by the Socialist Party. Belgium is one of the European countries where educational and labour market inequalities are highest. A young Belgian-Moroccan or Belgian-Congolese will be three times less likely to find a job than a youth of Belgian origin. In addition, unlike Paris or other major cities in France where the popular classes are relegated to the periphery, the popular neighbourhoods of Brussels are in the heart of the city: there is only ten minutes walk between Molenbeek and the hipsters of the Dansaert neighbourhood in the centre of the capital. In some of the poorer districts of Brussels, which includes the municipalities of Brussels-City, Schaerbeek, Saint-Josse, Anderlecht, Saint-Gilles and Molenbeek, the unemployment rate among young people is sometimes well over 50%. All of this is in addition to the police harassment suffered by the young people of entire neighbourhoods. Verbal and physical violence against immigrants of Muslim culture has also greatly increased in recent years in the country.

In such a context, it is not surprising that groups such as Daesh and other forces of the extreme-fundamentalist right have managed to recruit a few dozen people and that Molenbeek, far from the clichés, is not the only one affected by the jihadist phenomenon. In fact, it is important to emphasize that the Flemish fiefdom of the N-VA, Antwerp, is the biggest source of Belgian fighters for Daesh, that a terrorist cell was arrested in Verviers in the east of the country in January 2015 and that a number of other communities in and out of Brussels have been cited in various investigations. Also, proportionally, Belgium is the country that has the most combatants in Syria. It has been a place of residence or passage for other perpetrators of attacks such as Mehdi Nemmouche who attacked the Jewish Museum in Brussels or Amedy Coulibaly who bought arms here before committing the attacks against the Hyper Cacher in Paris last January. Finally, two of the perpetrators of the attacks in Paris lived in the Brussels Region.

The jihad phenomenon which the left and social movements must face today is complex. In the context that we have described above, it is generally not religion which motivates the attraction toward organizations such as Daesh and the passage to the deed. It is rather via the Internet, in particular thanks to a well rehearsed propaganda, or in the street, that they are recruited. There is no typical profile among the perpetrators of the attacks in Europe, either on the social or religious level for example: Abdelhamid Abaaoud, one of the alleged organizers of the attacks in Paris, studied in a fairly prestigious lycée and was not a mosque attendee. Many of these jihadists are in identity crisis, some are in search of glory, or a cause to defend, others still seek redemption or an outlet. Those caught in the inhuman prison system in Belgium or in France - where the majority of inmates are people originating from postcolonial immigration, although crime is not stronger in their communities - are also in the kind of despair that is conducive to recruitment by Islamic fundamentalists.

It is clear that the situation of structural racism in European societies, added to the imperialist wars carried out in the Middle East by both the USA and their European allies, then more recently by Russia, as well as the persistence of the oppression of the Palestinian people, feed the propaganda of organizations such as Daesh. A policy of prevention, of accompaniment and interculturality, in partnership with the local communities, can help, unlike the completely repressive approach implemented for years in Brussels. In all this, the role of anti-capitalist political forces as actors of resistance, but also as representatives of a radical perspective of another society, is paramount. In the short term, the left must avoid the traps set by the attacks and the context that they create.

Collective emotion and political consequences

In Belgium, the attacks in Brussels have not so far benefited the government and the reactionary forces to the extent they had hoped for. But the situation is not brilliant for the labour movement and the left either. In fact, the essence of

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the political advantage of the attacks was used by the government last year, in particular after the attacks in Paris. The dream of bringing the army onto the streets, included in the program of the N-VA, was able to materialize. The attacks were then used as a weapon of mass distraction in the face of the austerity policy pursued by the Liberal-nationalist coalition, and provided a golden excuse for the most collaborationist wing of the union bureaucracy, which halted actions against the government.

After March 22, the Place de la Bourse, in the heart of Brussels, was converted into a place of contemplation, of tribute and gathering for the people of the city, bringing together in the image of the victims workers, men and women of different cultures and nationalities, adults, children, young people and pensioners. The representatives of the different faiths, Muslims first, trade union and anti-racist movements, the Hart Boven Hard movement representing Flemish associations and cultural circles opposed to austerity, and its Francophone equivalent Tout autre Chose all condemned the attacks, but also warned against hatred and divisions on the basis of religion that they intended to strengthen in society. If Belgian flags were a little more visible than usual, this did not reflect a national arrogance to which Belgium, a state which has grappled since its creation with the Flemish national question, is no longer accustomed.

For the government, the N-VA was the main source of provocative and racist rhetoric: its president, Bart De Wever, even said he felt “hatred, because these people still receive support from their community”. Jan Jambon, Minister of the Interior and a pillar of the N-VA in the government coalition, also made incendiary statements, first comparing the fleeing jihadists to Jews who were in hiding during the Second World War, and then stating that a significant share of Muslims in Belgium had “danced” during the attacks, even going so far as to say that the terrorists “are only a pustule. Below is a cancer which is much more difficult to treat” (sic), employing a clearly far right vocabulary.

These declarations cannot be disconnected from the post-attacks context in Belgium. On Sunday, March 27, a few days after the attacks, the mayor of Brussels-city and the Minister of the Interior banned a march “against fear and for living together” which was to take place in the Bourse. Despite the fact that the organizers, who were not left wing activists, had agreed to postpone the march, many people still came to gather at the Bourse that day. They ended up faced with a march by Belgian hooligans, among them many activists of the extreme right, which had been able to take place without permission and under police escort. The political purpose of the manoeuvre was to break the symbol of solidarity and of contemplation that the Bourse had become and replace it with an image of racism and aggressive Islamophobia. The social-democratic local authorities of Brussels and Vilvoorde had followed the direction of the N-VA Minister of the Interior and a police commissioner in Brussels, Vandersmissen, renowned for his ultra-authoritarian sympathies and his violent methods against left protesters. The N-VA, in slow but continuous decline in the face of the neo-fascists of the Vlaams Belang (the main party of the extreme right) in Flanders, did not condemn the assault by the hooligans, unlike the other parties represented in Parliament.

A week later, the strong state had again shown its shadow as during the level 4 alert and lockdown last November: while the Metro was still only half operative in the capital, the government authorized 24/7 searches and 200 new soldiers were mobilized in the streets of Brussels. All demonstrations were prohibited during the weekend in the whole of Brussels. but not shopping in the major commercial arteries, of course. The planned assembly at the Bourse against fascism and Islamophobia and in tribute to the victims of the terrorist attacks, which went ahead despite the ban, then experienced violent repression from the same police officers who had protected the fascists and hooligans on March 27. The President of the League of Human Rights was even arrested “as an example” according to Commissioner Vandersmissen. Once again the message is clear: the forces of repression and the authorities want to stifle any politicization by the left of the attacks.

The extreme right is waiting in ambush: very divided and marginal in the south of the country, although the different formations together account for more than 10% of the votes, it is however very much present in Flanders. It is even virtually hegemonic there as racism has contaminated the political discourse and the media and it is rooted in society. The N-VA has, in rhythm with its electoral rise, welcomed dozens of local elected representatives and activists of the

Vlaams Belang. But after a year and a half of governmental erosion for the N-VA, the Vlaams Belang is again rising in the polls. It also directs the Islamophobic movement Pegida Flanders, in collaboration with fascist groupuscules, but without great success: the assemblies gather at most 150 to 300 people and the counter-demonstrators are always three to four times more numerous. The prospects for the far right also depend on the way in which the social movement reacts following the attacks and in the face of the actual penetration of the program of the right, from the presence of the army in the streets to structural discrimination.

The government is also experiencing difficulties. After the incomprehension created by the lockdown of November, the government rhetoric and the army in the streets did not prevent a massacre. The criticism of the management of investigations, or the non-closure of the metro after the explosion at the airport and the failure to take into account important information about one of the suicide bombers have embarrassed the Minister of Justice Koen Geens (Flemish Christian Democrat) and the Minister of the Interior Jambon, whose resignations Charles Michel refused to accept in an attempt to cover for his government. Shortly afterwards, the failure to take into account warnings on airport security resulted in the resignation of the Minister of Transport, the Liberal Jacqueline Galant, already under challenge for her visible incompetence as she attempted to carry out colossal budget cuts on the railways. A commission of inquiry has been opened on the attacks, from which the PTB, the only radical left force in the Parliaments of the country, has been excluded. The recent statements of Jan Jambon on the Muslims who supposedly “danced” following the attacks have in turn sparked a wave of scandalized reactions from anti-racist milieus but also from the parliamentary opposition, including the social democrats, denouncing the inability of the Minister to provide the slightest evidence of his claims.

And this is not all. The Michel government has quickly had to resume its work of budgetary control, in the midst of the Panama Papers affair. This adjustment has served as a pretext for a train of measures of deregulation of employment of great magnitude including, in particular, the announcement of the end of the standard 38 hour week and the 8 hour day through a generalized annualization of working time. Attacks are also planned against civil service pensions, the long term sick and employment contracts through the establishment of zero hour and temporary contracts.

What response from the labour movement?

The trade union branches of the two big confederations, the FGTB (Socialist) and CSC (Christian) had conducted a credible plan of actions in the autumn of 2014 to combat the first austerity plans and counter-reforms of the right wing-Flemish nationalist government. A wave of demonstrations and strikes had culminated in a massive inter-professional strike day in December 2014. But the movement as stopped in the name of “social dialogue”, this system that puts negotiations between trade unions and employers at the centre of the evolution of employment law and social security. In 2015, while it was clear that this so-called consultation had allowed the government to advance, the trade union movement slid into actions which were of lesser magnitude and more scattered, without perspective. The attacks in Paris, it was said, had served as a pretext to the ultimate disorientation and total retrenchment of trade-union struggles. In the last few weeks, the FGTB has for example not reacted publicly to the violent repression of the Bourse against the left and to police complicity with the extreme right, whereas trade union activists represented a good part of the hundreds arrested.

But rank and file anger at the government’s projects remains. The revival of the social movement in France and the Panama Papers feed the hopes of the more combative trade unionists. Also, in the last few weeks, Belgium has experienced a spontaneous strike of air traffic controllers, workers at a steel mill have imprisoned their directors so as to obtain the payment of their wages some Nuits Debout have appeared in several cities. The unions have therefore re-launched actions in dispersed fashion, a strike of some civil servants will take place at the end of April and the possibility of unitary demonstrations of great magnitude or even strikes is evoked.

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The main radical left force in Belgium, the PTB, with its 10,000 members and its parliamentarians at federal and regional level, has several advantages in the current situation. It has first succeeded in building a presence in many popular neighbourhoods of Brussels, Antwerp and even Liège, with a strong population of Muslim culture. It also has a strong trade union implantation in the organized bastions of industry and a positive relationship with a number of social movements and citizens like Hart Boven Hard and Tout Autre Chose. Its spokesperson Raoul Hedebouw is very popular in the south of the country for his denunciation of the austerity and the tax unfairness whose gravity has just been displayed by the Panama Papers.

However, like other left forces in Europe and in the world, the PTB is uncomfortable with the issue of terrorism. Thus, its members abstained on the forfeiture of nationality in July 2015, before making their mea culpa publicly six months later, and sent contradictory messages when the government granted an extra €400 million to the budget against terrorism. Similarly, its calls to fright hatred and division are often combined with a discourse on national unity.

The approach followed by the PTB wishes to be “pragmatic” and to focus its criticism on the lack of effectiveness of anti-terrorist measures through the defence of a more “targeted” approach. But the social movement and the forces of the radical left have every interest in pointing out and fighting specifically the dangers represented by the strong state, national unity and rampant Islamophobia for all democratic and social rights.

At the international level, the healthy reflex of opposing Belgian participation in the strikes of the coalition in Iraq and Syria and the expenditure of several billion for the purchase of new fighter aircraft in fact represents consensus within the Belgian radical left. However, this reflex is accompanied in the PTB, but also other sectors of the left, by a vision of the Syrian and Middle Eastern situation sympathetic to the reactionary camp made up by Russian imperialism, the Iranian theocracy and the Assad regime. In this perspective, taking large liberties with the facts, the only solution in Syria would be to support Assad as a lesser evil to combat Daesh, the latter being only the product of the intervention of the USA, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The rest of the Syrian opposition, civilian and military, is swept from the table, as is the proven complicity of the Assad regime in the emergence and growth of Daesh, their common trafficking, their joint operations against the territories controlled by Syrian opposition... and especially, despite the fact that pro-Assad forces are responsible for more than 90% of dead civilians in Syria, by a range of methods just as abominable as those that have made Daesh famous. Thus, sending the message that a few hundred deaths from atrocities in Brussels or Paris have much more importance than those of hundreds of thousands of Syrian (and Iraqi) civilians, most of them Sunni Arabs, does in fact feed the sectarian propaganda of Daesh. All these deaths are however linked: the chaos caused by the counter-revolution in the region, particularly in Syria, cannot spare Europe.

The majority of left currents around the world have probably committed their worst fault of the beginning of this century by refusing to Syrians any political and concrete solidarity, thus ironically echoing the policies carried out in reality by Western imperialism. Since the partial truce in March, Syrians have resumed their dozens of weekly demonstrations to denounce both Assad and Daesh and Al-Nusra. The struggling peoples of the region are the only ones capable of permanently depriving Daesh of its popular base and its territory. Daesh is the rotten fruit of local dictatorships and of neo-colonialism. Both here and there, the terrorist attacks serve the mutual interests of the neoliberal police state and fascistic reactionary forces, and create the risk of a desperate paralysis of the social struggle. It may not be too late to radically change direction. It is up to the popular movements and the forces of the radical left to take up the thread of internationalism and to offer a meaning and a perspective to the rising anger in this degenerate capitalist world. And these tasks are current well beyond Belgium.