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Belgium

Understanding the Belgian crisis

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The politics into which Belgium is sinking remain unintelligible if we do not grasp the specific interaction between objective and subjective factors, and between the long history of the country and recent developments.

Indeed, it is necessary to understand : that we cannot simply say that this crisis concerns those at the top, that those at the bottom have “other problems” and so on.. There is obviously an element of truth in this affirmation, but the crisis poses bizarre questions to which it is impossible to avoid without fading from the political field To respond is first to understand the underlying factors.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/png/Belgiumsplit.png>]

In a good materialist logic, we should start from economic developments.. From this viewpoint, things are simple enough: the Flemish employers have an ambitious project of development so that Flanders remains one of the most prosperous regions in Europe. Its great asset is the port of Antwerp, the third biggest in the world (the second after New York if we do not take into account the oil tonnages passing through Rotterdam). But Antwerp is landlocked at thirty kilometres from the mouth of the Scheldt. It can only keep its place through a vast investment programmes in the port area itself, in the arc between Antwerp and Zeebrugge as well as in the whole of the periphery, towards Lille, Holland, Germany. The maintenance of the economic dynamism of the Flemish enterprises and the attractiveness of the area for the multinationals depends on this. On the social level, that assumes a sharpening everywhere of neoliberal policies: reform of social security, flexibility of labour, mobility and training of the workforce, immigration, asylum, incomes policy, not to mention the repercussions on land development, the environment and so on.

There is no longer a Belgian capitalism

This is the key point : this project is that of the “new” Flemish employers. The rise in power of this faction of the dominant class began after the Second World War. Its relative weight has sharply increased since the dismemberment of the Société Générale (the holding founded by William of Orange even before the country became independent), which dominated the economy of the country and had a determinant weight on the parties as well as on the state up to the highest level (the monarchy). The inequality of development between the North and the South of the country has constituted a characteristic trait of the “Belgian provinces” since the 13th century. with its industrial investment in Flanders and Wallonia, the Générale in a way counterbalanced it for some decades in the 20th century. But it did so in a very specific manner. After the war, instead of relying on the industrial jewels to occupy some niches in the international arena, the Générale confined itself increasingly to financially exploiting them. Belgium has then neither the equivalent of Philips in Holland, nor Volvo in Sweden.

Subjected to this rentier capitalism, and in the absence of an adequate investment policy, the enterprises of the group were hit head on by the reversal of the long expansionary wave in the 1970s. In the south of the country, already hit by the coal crisis, their restructuring only left a field of ruins. In Flanders, it cleared the field for the expansion of a regional capitalism based on its dynamic small and medium businesses, on its banks (Kredietbank) and on investment by multinationals. The coup de grace was delivered by the Italian businessman Carlo De Benedetti. who described the Société Générale as the incarnation of a “capitalism in a nightcap”. It was not only comical but also very true. Although repelled with the help of Suez “called to the rescue by the Belgian state” the takeover bid launched by the boss of Olivetti was going to sound the knell of the “old lady”. Since then, there is no longer a “Belgian capitalism”.. We cannot understand the current crisis without taking account of this reality.

The institutional superstructure is no longer in synch with the reality of capital. Closely linked historically to the Société Générale, the monarchy has no real base among the new Flemish employing class. The reform of the state in the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by a certain number of aberrations in the division of competences, in such a way that the federated entities, like the central state, are sometimes handicapped in the implementation of coherent policies. The situation of the region of Brussels, the capital, is particularly untenable: insufficiency of resources, division into 19 communes, cramped territory. Finally and above all, the maintenance of the national social security system, created in 1944, implies that a certain number of levers cannot be fully at the service of the Flemish employers' project, in its specificity.

The nationalists of the North of the country denounce the "financial transfers" from wealthy Flanders to poor Wallonia (in fact the solidarity of the more numerous and better paid employees of Flanders with the more numerous social security claimants in Wallonia). This agitation is only the deformed political translation of the fact that the Flemish employers want to "reform" social security in line with their specific neoliberal project, and to be able to rely more on the available workforce...in Wallonia. For inequality of development appears anew in full daylight: whereas the old Walloon industrial belt remains hit by massive unemployment, the Flemish economy fears labour shortages. Such shortages have consequences for "end of career development", "asylum management" or "activating jobseekers".

The Francophone parties grumble. But why, precisely? Is it well need of specifying that the blockage of negotiations has nothing to do with a left-right confrontation? Is it not enough to glance at the policy of the federated Walloon, Brussels and Francophone entities to note that the Francophone parties are as converted to neoliberalism as their Flemish equivalents? If they oppose Flemish requests for a split from social security, or regionalisation of contractual negotiations, it is because they fear the deflationary effects and the political destabilisation which could result in Wallonia from a new and brutal degradation of social protection, in other words because neoliberal policies have created a south of the country which differs in its rhythms and modalities from what happens in the North. In the healthcare sector, for example, a split on the basis of tax contributions of the regions would create a differential of around 25% in available means in the north and south of the country.

The tortuous roads of politics

This whole background is expressed in the governmental crisis. But politics, as we know, never simply speaks the language of economics. The two spheres are linked by specific mediations, and it is here that things get complicated. In the Belgian case, the transfer takes place through the national question, that is via the Flemish question. This leads to an outbidding of superficial and impressionist interpretations. To claim that the Flemish question can be reduced to a cultural frustration, for example, is to completely bypass the essence of things. The national question, here as elsewhere, is only the envelope of the social question. Forcing the comparison a little, we could say that Flanders has been to Belgium what Ireland was to the United Kingdom: a reserve of cheap labour and a source of cheap agricultural products allowing the compression of workers' wages. Same underdevelopment, same famine, same emigration. Same contempt for the language and the people. Who, outside of some English people, would dare to treat Irish nationalists as "culturally frustrated"?

The economic situation is reversed, one can say. Certainly: it is Wallonia which is poor and held in contempt today. The national rights of the Flemish are no longer oppressed - the nationalist leader Vic Anceaux himself admitted it nearly thirty years ago. But we should take into account historic gravity. It has had a considerable effect on the left. For the left is still paying for the big historical error of Belgian social democracy, which refused to embrace the legitimate cause of the Flemish people. The German August Bebel had pressed the Belgian Workers Party (POB, ancestor of the PS) to profit from the fact that the Flemish workers did not speak the language of their exploiters. In vain: the party of Vandervelde refused to take this internationalist path. Already infected by class collaboration, it increasingly preferred to comfortably insert itself in the undemocratic, monarchic and Francophone institutional

system. A system set up by the great powers to play the role of buffer between post-revolutionary France and the North of Europe, without the two peoples living on this territory – Flemish and Walloon – being consulted on the forms of their cohabitation.

In the absence of a left alternative, the Flemish movement was hegemonised and recuperated by the right, via the lower clergy who played a key role here. Their rabid virulence and typically petty bourgeois revanchism reflected the humiliations and contempt endured. And this is not the only consequence of the historic error of the POB: among the working class, the failure to take up Flemish democratic demands left the field free to the Catholic hierarchy. Indeed, after the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the latter set up a Christian trade union, whose explicit goal was to form a counterweight to the socialist trade union. Since then, Christian trades unionism has dominated the working class in Flanders, whereas socialist trades unionism remains more powerful in Wallonia. The confessional cleavage has hardly any meaning today inside the labour movement. . But the organisational line of divide remains, superimposed on the linguistic line of divide.

Flemish nationalism in a time of neoliberalism

If the end of Belgian capitalism is the key to grasping the objective bases of the crisis, the comprehension of the subjective aspects necessitates grasping the evolution of Flemish nationalism in the dual context of the economic triumph of Flanders and the ideological triumph of neoliberalism. Here also, it is necessary to avoid superficial interpretations.

That this nationalism is no longer the envelope of exploitation and oppression is obvious. But it is completely erroneous to see in the unanimity of the Flemish parties around autonomist demands the demonstration of an atavistic “fascistisation” of the North of the country under the aegis of the *Vlaams Belang*. Let it be understood: The *Vlaams Belang* (25% of the votes in Flanders) is a far right party, the nucleus of its historic leadership is fascist and a fraction of the employers supports this party. The danger that it represents cannot be underestimated. But the Flemish employers lead the dance, and they have not chosen to play the far right card, which would imply a confrontation with the powerful Christian workers’ movement. Why would it do so? All the “democratic” parties carry out their activities in the framework that it has laid down. Flemish social democracy, completely thrown by the slippage of its popular electorate to the *Vlaams Belang*, has no other perspective than to go along with the neoliberal project for Flanders. As to the Greens, they have warm anti-nationalist souls, but present no social alternative.

In truth, it is the hegemonisation of the Flemish political class by neoliberalism, not by fascism, which expresses itself in the Flemish front. Hence the nationalist outbidding between parties. With the shift of the economic centre of gravity to the North of the country, Flemish nationalism has become the ideological form of the neoliberal project in the specific context of Flanders. It is this specific alchemy which explains how the split of the last bilingual electoral arrondissement, *Bruxelles-Halle-Vilvoorde* (BHV), has become a fetishist question of political life. “ We are the rich ones now and we will lay down our law to you”: that is the symbolic meaning of the vote of the only Flemish parliamentarians on the split of BHV, in the internal commission of the Chamber. The outraged Francophones talk of a “slap in the face”. Arrogance, indeed, has changed sides... Note nonetheless that the Flemish have for their part a certain logic: why maintain this unitary arrondissement when the whole country is split on a linguistic basis, including the Province of Brabant which the Francophone parties refused to make a bilingual area in 1962? That said, this vote is not the expression of a separatist threat. Outside of a minority fringe, the Flemish employers do not desire the break up of Belgium but the autonomy of Flanders in the framework of a state which poses no hindrance to its project.

You can see it: the Belgian crisis is situated at the intersection between a series of historic factors, on the one hand,

and the neoliberal politics of the supremacy of the market, on the other. The ideological by products that accompany this are unsurprising : the arrogance of money, the glorification of social inequality, the banalisation of xenophobia, the rupture of social solidarities. Given the role of the European Union (EU) in the implementation of this policy, is truly too funny for some Francophones to denounce the Flemish in the name of the “European model of coexistence in difference” of which Belgium, they say, would be the illustration. What model? “European integration renders the Belgian state fragile” : although “Le Monde Diplomatique” had posed this diagnosis nearly 20 years ago (July 1988), nobody seems to want to understand that what has happened here is not a wart on the nose of the EU but a specific product of its policy. An increasingly difficult product to manage, moreover, for neoliberal governance can only deepen the gap between the rich regions and the poor regions, all the more so when they are inhabited by different peoples. It is here, in fact, that Belgium is an illustration and a “model”: the formation of parliaments and of regional and community governments charged with applying neoliberal policies has certainly allowed fifteen years of relative “community peace”. But at the price of an incapacity of the greater part of the political personnel of the dominant class to understand that what happens on “the other side”, not to speak of raising itself to the level of the management of the state overall.

No way out without a break with market mechanisms

Fundamentally, the solution to the Belgian sickness involves a social and economic policy which can reduce the inequality of development between the north and south of the country. . such a policy involves a redistribution of wealth and a revival of public investment, thus challenge to the logic of the market . This was understood by the left wing of the General Federation of Labour of Belgium (Fédération générale du travail de Belgique (FGTB)) which at the end of the 1950s linked the demand for federalism to that of anti-capitalist reform of the structures (nationalisation of energy and credit, notably). Adopted by the 1954 and 1956 congresses of the socialist trade union, this programme played a decisive role in the workers’ mobilisation which led to the “strike of the century” in the winter of 1960-1961. After the strike, it fell little by little into the memory hole because the Walloon FGTB fell into a regionalist framework whose fruits can be seen today.. Then came the years 1977-1993 in the course of which the working class, in spite of a heated resistance, suffered a very heavy defeat, largely due to the policy of concertation and division of its trade union apparatuses..

And now? Pushed onto the defensive, the weakened workers’ movement is confronted with a new challenge.: to save the social security system. This battle can only be won by an internationalist struggle of the workers, Walloon and Flemish, FGTB and CSC (Confédération des syndicats chrétiens – Confederation of Christian Trades Unions), and by adapting to the ultra-defensive context of today the algebraic formula of 1954-1956: there is no worthwhile federalism, no democracy, as long as Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels constitute this “paradise for capitalists” that Marx had already denounced. The big problem : to go in this direction, the trade union movement must dare to intervene on the political level, oppose the neoliberal yoke of the EU and that of the Belgian state also.. It must dare, above all, to oppose an internationalist line to the regionalist line of social democracy. That goes totally against its continued slide over the last twenty years towards a “trades unionism which accommodates change “. However, there is no other practical road in the interests of those who, to live, are forced to sell their labour power. If this battle should be lost, the conditions of life and struggle in Belgium could well change radically, and for a very long time.

** We reproduce here an article first published in the Belgian weekly “Journal du Mardi”.*