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Belgium

Magnificent success of the PTB-Left Opening lists

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Before May 25, there were no elected representatives of what is called the "radical" left in Belgium, unlike in other countries in Europe. This anomaly has now been corrected. The PTB-GO! [1] lists are in fact sending two members to the Belgian federal Chamber of Deputies (Raoul Hedebouw in Liège and Marco Van Hees in Hainaut), two to the Walloon Parliament (including the steelworker Frédéric Gillot) and four to the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital region. Apart from Vincent Decroly and Bernard Wesphael, who were elected for the Ecolo party but who continued to sit after resigning from their party (one on the federal level federal and the other in the Walloon Region), there had been no member of parliament to the left of the Socialists (PS) and the Greens since the early 1980s ...

Liège and Hainaut

The PTB-GO! lists won about 133 000 votes for the federal Chamber, 118,000 for the Walloon Parliament (5.76 per cent) and 15,800 for the Brussels Parliament (3.86 per cent) [3]. The highest scores were achieved in the region of Liège: 50,600 votes, or 8.08 per cent, for the Chamber. Spectacular peaks were seen in the cantons of Herstal (20.67%, second party after the Socialist Party), Seraing (15.66%, the third party after the PS and MR), Liège (11.49 per cent), Grace-Hollogne (11.7 per cent) and Saint-Nicolas (10.3 per cent).

The second seat in the Chamber was won in Hainaut with 38,000 electors representing 5.17 per cent of the votes cast. The Hainaut cantons cannot compete with Herstal or Seraing, but some of the results are far from negligible: 8.7 per cent in Charleroi, 8.63 per cent in La Louvière, 6.67 per cent in Châtelet and scores between 5 and 6 per cent in Mons, Binche, Boussu and Fontaine-Bishop.

The province of Namur caused a surprise with a score of 4.86 per cent. Pulled upward by the results of the working-class cantons of the industrial zone (5.06 per cent in Fosses-la-Ville), it was not very far from the threshold of electability (5 per cent). In other districts, the results were more modest. This was the case in Walloon Brabant and Luxembourg, but also in Brussels. In the capital, the list for the Chamber received 19,000 votes (3.84 per cent); the 5 per cent threshold was crossed in the canton of Saint-Gilles (7.96 per cent).

Reasons for progress

The progress of the PTB-GO! Lists compared to the PTB + lists in the 2010 elections [4] is clear and considerable. In the federal election of 2010, the PTB + won 39,000 votes in the Walloon constituencies, to which should be added some 9,000 votes for the list PTB-PVDA + in Brussels. Overall, the gains are more than 270 per cent! They are strongest in the province of Namur and in Brussels, two regions where the PTB-GO! scored more than three times the result of the PTB in 2010.

This leap was the result of several factors. The most important was undoubtedly the dissatisfaction provoked by the austerity policies imposed by the government of Elio Di Rupo. During the campaign, on the ground, activists could see for themselves: a part of the traditional social base of the PS wanted to punish it and to express its desire for a social alternative.

The second factor was the general tone of the PTB-GO! campaign, particularly the way it was expressed during the

interventions in the media by its spokesperson, Raoul Hedebouw. The discourse that was developed, the arguments, the demands that were put forward on these occasions, the way of speaking to the mass of the people; it was all pretty well adapted to the present level of radicalization.

The third factor was the image that was created by bringing together the "left for an opening" (the LCR, the Communist Party of Wallonia-Brussels, PCWB, and various personalities) and accentuated by the declaration of the Charleroi FGTB: "We welcome this first step in the direction our appeal of May 1, 2012 " [5]. Thanks to the "Left Opening" voters were left feeling that the old quarrels were being overcome, so that the vote for the PTB-GO! lists would enable them to simply express their support for the slogans, the principles and the fundamental values of the whole (real) left, such as social justice, tax justice and solidarity.

It is obviously impossible to give an exact weight to these different elements. Given the score achieved in the province of Liège, it is likely that Raoul Hedebouw would have been elected even on a PTB + list without the additional support concretized in the "Left Opening." But he would certainly not have been joined in the Chamber by Marco Van Hees. In fact, the PTB-GO! list for the Chamber in Hainaut exceeded the electability threshold by about 1,300 votes. However, the two LCR candidates added 2,500 votes to the list, and the CPWB nearly a thousand more. [6]. In addition, it was in this province that the trade union left committed itself the most explicitly, and it would not have done that for PTB or PTB + lists.

Failure of other left lists

The success of the PTB-Left Opening lists left no chance for other formations who were seeking the votes of electors looking for an alternative to the left of the PS and Ecolo.

Headed up by Vincent Decroly, the Green Left VEGA list for the European Parliament obtained just over 15,000 votes (0.68 per cent), despite the fact that the head of the list was very well-known. The list for the Walloon Parliament in the constituency of Liège - the bastion of VEGA - obtained 3,500 votes (1.02 per cent) and the list for the Brussels parliament got 2,500 (0.57 per cent). Although VEGA has received significant media coverage for what is a very new formation, we are very far from the expectations expressed by Decroly in his interview in *Le Soir* last autumn, and still farther from the perspective of "three elected representatives" formulated by another spokesperson for the movement.

The situation is even more cruel for the Movement of the Left (MG): present at all levels, it won only 4,700 votes in the European elections, 4,500 at federal level and 4,900 in the Walloon region. Results that were more than modest...

To complete the picture, we should also mention the attempts of the lists of the Common Lefts: 839 votes for the Brussels Parliament, 1,445 for the Chamber in the capital (0.29 per cent). Despite a big propaganda effort, in some municipalities of Brussels in particular, the front between the Socialist Party of Struggle (PSL) and the Humanist Party did not convince the electors.

Responding to the appeal of Charleroi

It is clear that the voters did not see the point of these lists. Having misunderstood the situation, the leaders of VEGA and the MG believed that a denunciation of the "Stalinism" of the PTB would be enough to justify their existence and that the reference to ecosocialism in the manner of the French Left Party would bring them more electoral credibility.

But it was not around this kind of very ideological demarcations that the outcome of the elections could be decided.

As for the PSL, after contributing at the local elections to establishing "left fronts" and trying subsequently to coordinate them, it seems that it wanted to take part in the PTB-GO! Alliance but failed to approach the question in a credible way. Its "open letter" for "PTB-unity" lists appeared as an ultimatum. It was regrettable that it then tried to hide its disappointment by launching ill-judged attacks against the PCWB and the LCR.

In general, success for the radical left in this election could only go to formations that were capable of situating themselves in the rising wave created by the appeal of the Charleroi FGTB. From the moment that the PTB had opened up to some extent to the principle of an alliance, the LCR considered that it was around this organization that it was necessary to regroup, because it was the only way to have a chance of being successful, and that to have a success was decisive for the pursuit of the anti-capitalist polarization of the trade-union left. The facts have proved us right.

In Flanders

In Flanders, there was no regroupment comparable to the PTB-Left Opening. The PTB stood under the name PVDA +, as in previous elections, and welcomed on its lists candidates of opening – in particular, members of the LCR-SAP. There was no other list to the left of social democracy (Socialistische Partij Anders, SPA) and the Greens (Groen).

Getting its president Peter Mertens elected to the Chamber was a priority for the PTB-PVDA. It failed narrowly: 52,000 electors voted PVDA + in the province of Antwerp. A very good result (4.52 per cent), but, alas, less than the electability threshold. This was a disappointment, especially sharp because the activists had given so much and because the PVDA won 8.85 per cent of the vote in the canton of Antwerp (becoming the fourth party, ahead of the fascist Vlaams Belang).

In the other constituencies in the North of the country, the results of the PVDA+, though registering progress compared to 2010, remained more modest: 2.67 per cent in East Flanders, 2.57 per cent in Limburg, 1.86 per cent in Flemish Brabant, 1.66 per cent in West Flanders.

It goes without saying that the difference in level between the results of the PTB-GO! and those of the PVDA + can be explained primarily by the difference in the political and social context between the two regions. Faced with an ultra-right majority, many left-wing voters preferred to vote for social democracy and, above all, for the Greens, who progressed. It is even possible that some people, on the basis of opinion polls, believed that the seat of Mertens was in the bag and that therefore they could give their vote to the government left, so that it would not lose too badly.

Nevertheless, we can ask ourselves whether the question of the opening does not arise also in Flanders. The PvdA was not capable of affirming openly and publicly the presence on its lists of candidates of opening, and it even made some blunders. Who knows whether a little more culture of regroupment would not have put Peter Mertens in the same situation as Marco Van Hees in Hainault?

This article was written for *La Gauche*, French-language bimonthly of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR, Belgian section of the Fourth International, which is called Socialistische Arbeidrespartij or SAP in Flanders).

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[1] The PTB, Belgian Workers' Party, PvdA in Flemish, is a party of Maoist origin, and by far the strongest force to the left of social democracy in Belgium. For these elections it opened up its lists to other forces under the name PTB-GO! (PTB-Left Opening).

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[3] The figures are rounded-out. In general, the differences in results between the federal, regional and European lists were hardly significant.

[4] PTB + individual non members, but not parties as in the 2014 elections

[5] On the appeal of May 1, 2012 of the Charleroi FGTB in favour of an alternative to the left of the PS and Ecolo, see "Eight questions on trade-union independence and politics, International Viewpoint 465, October 2013. The FGTB is the main trade union confederation in Wallonia: historically it has been close to social democracy

[6] Two ways of voting exist in Belgium: you can either vote for one or more candidates from the same list (preferential votes), or you can vote for a party. In the latter case, the votes cast for the party are distributed among the candidates, taking into account their order on the list and the number of votes they lack to be elected. The candidates at the top of the list are thus "privileged." Moreover, each list has full candidates and alternate candidates... The total of the preferential votes received by the candidates of the LCR, generally in unelectable positions on the PVDA + and PTB + GO! lists were: 12,012 for the European elections, 9,227 in the elections for the Chamber of Deputies, 2,674 votes for the Brussels Parliament, 3,667 votes for the Flemish Parliament and 3,187 votes for the Walloon Parliament.