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Belgium

120,000 demonstrators against Michel 1!

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The national demonstration in Brussels, the beginning of the plan of action of the common trade union against the Michel 1 plans (and the cuts at the regional level) was a huge success. With 120,000 participants, all expectations were broadly met. Contrary to what was feared at one time, the mobilization was a great success in Flanders also: there were thus 20,000 participants from the province of Antwerp, close to 9,000 from Eastern Flanders and so on. The fear created by some that the CSC and the liberal CGSLB union would only mobilize verbally also proved unfounded.

From different regions, in Flanders also, the extra trains planned were still inadequate to bring everyone to Brussels, so that some trade unionists who wanted to join the march had to return home. There could have been even more people!

It was more than obvious that this demonstration brought many more people into the streets than active trade unionists alone. For many participants, it was not only the first time that they were participating in a union demonstration, but the presence of many students, high school students and youth organizations, the feminist bloc formed by a whole series of groups of women, and especially the visible and appreciated presence of Hart boven Hard ("the heart, not rigor") which represents hundreds of organizations and movements of the social and cultural sector in Flanders, was heart-warming.

During the demonstration, groups of young leftists (JOC, our youth groups JAC-JAK, Young FGTB and Young CSC, the Union Syndicale Etudiante and so on) led a brief occupation of the head office of the FEB, where a symbolic people's tribunal was held against the big employers and their interest groups. The action was entirely peaceful and without major problems.

What about the clashes?

Serious problems erupted in the neighbourhood behind the Midi station when some of the demonstrators wanted to move toward the head office of the MR in the vicinity. The police responded with water cannons and a muscular cordon. Several cars and a police motorcycle were burned in the course of the afternoon. Meanwhile, it was revealed that provocateurs (some neo-Nazis, but also police officers) were also involved in these events. The Association of Professional Journalists also reported police violence against journalists.

At this time when we are at the beginning of a major plan of action, such violence does not contribute to the success of the actions. At the same time, many activists have had more than enough of the fairly traditional Nord-Midi walks, which have been organized on several occasions in the past few years. Some of them could probably no longer suppress their thirst for more direct action. Of course, there are other elements to the source of this anger (particularly the attacks against the dockers), and it is essential to remember that the real responsibility for the riots is located in the government.

But it might not be a bad idea to better regulate this desire the next time and therefore make better targets. But we also believe that it is essential that the broadest possible layers of the population are involved in the action plan of the unions, and not only the "hard core" of the trade union movement. It is therefore important that counter-productive slips are avoided.

Win the strikes!

The next step in the national plan of action will be the various provincial strikes. They also must be a resounding success. Failure is not an option, what is at stake here is the future of all our social rights, and that of the trade unions themselves!

The best way to win the actions is the broadest and most active involvement of all union members and activists. There are already some good examples here and there. Thus, the public service sector of the CGSP-ACOD in Antwerp functions with an action committee, where the activists, members of the executive and secretaries meet to prepare strike actions. In Limburg, the same CGSP-ACOD has already adopted this example in the form of a working group. The inter-sectoral CGSP in the region of Antwerp is taking steps in the same direction (even if the number of persons present in this specific action committee is inexplicably limited to two per sector). At the national level, there are similar initiatives.

These action committees contribute to the fact that the strike action can be organized with much more chance of success, by putting side-by-side of the activists in the strongest and weakest services or workplaces, by helping each other to produce leaflets and materials, but also by leading in this way the broadest possible democratic debate, which is useful to train a whole new layer of trade union activists and to raise their level of consciousness. Which in turn helps to develop around the union movement a broad and socially deeply rooted social resistance. The demonstration yesterday was a promising and enthusiastic starting point. It reinforces confidence in our own forces, which is very important. The belief that we can win is crucial for maintaining the basic struggle in the long term.

Don't be satisfied with mouldy crumbs!

After the demonstration, the leaders of the three trade unions were invited by Prime Minister Michel for a discussion. From the statements by Michel, Peeters (CD & V), Chastel (MR) and trade union officials after this discussion, it is clear that the government is not ready at all to put into question the essence of its plans. They only want trade unions to be involved in the implementation, and they can still only discuss the details. They hope to repeat what Prime Minister Wilfried Martens did in the mid-80s: turn back the unions with "some biscuits".

We believe that the trade union movement cannot be satisfied with pursuing negotiations on the crumbs – mouldy ones - which fall from the table, but that it must above all now implement the entire plan of action. Fortunately, it seems for the moment that the leadership of the three trade unions realizes this, while certainly also helped by the pressure from its rank and file and 120,000 people in the street.

According to the testimonies, those in the FGTB responsible for the private sector have already made it know - before the demonstration - to the federal committee of the FGTB that they would be willing to develop a response to the plan of action after the New Year, provided that there were more than 100,000 demonstrators. This condition has been very clearly fulfilled. Now let's introduce the discussion on the follow up of the actions after December 15!

Aside from that, the unions must also urgently open the broadest possible debate on their own alternatives, demands and the policies to be applied. In any case, the consultation cannot take place behind closed doors: the trade union rank and file must know what is being said on this subject and especially have the possibility of having its own word to say. No agreement without democratic votes in the entire trade union movement!

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