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Belgium

The Belgian unions in deadlock

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The two-day strike on the SNCB and above all the previous capitulation of the union leaders in Flanders, sadly once more exposed the dead end that the leaderships of the ACV and the ABVV have led the trade union movement to. The decision of the leadership of ACV-Transcom and ACOD-Rail in Flanders to announce to the media that there would be no strike in Flanders under any circumstances a few days before the announced start of the strike (according to many even at least initially a purely personal decision of Secretaries Luc Piens (ACV Transcom) and Ludo Sempels (ACOD-Rail)) was not just a stab in the back of the Brussels and Wallonian colleagues, but also brought the deep divisions about the attitude within the trade union movement to the right-wing government to light again.

In the case of ACOD-Rail the Flemish Secretaries also blatantly ignored the decision of a National Committee to first go for a 48 hour strike and then possibly a 72 hour strike if the action did not get results. (The National Committee is still formally the highest and certainly the most broadly composed body, in which delegates and activists are allowed to have their say.) For them, it seems the "democracy" of a couple of secretaries (looking suspiciously like a panic attack) takes precedence over democracy and participation (however limited it often is) of activists and delegates at their headquarters.

The betrayal of the rail strike in Flanders also meant a new setback for the many trade unionists who were hoping that this round in the fight for the preservation of social benefits and trade union achievements in the SNCB could be an attempt to restart the real work of social opposition to the government, and perhaps even lead to a new action plan.

The strike was finally quite successful in Wallonia and Brussels, where hardly any trains ran, and the strike turnout was around 80% according to the unions. In Flanders there were a respectable number of strikers, despite the downright cowardly position of trade union leaders on the rail, even if at Antwerp-Berchem there was only a limited token picket. Undoubtedly many Dutch speaking railway staff in Brussels participated in the strike.

Meanwhile, negotiations resumed at the SNCB. Railway management made it clear that although the implementation of the measures already taken unilaterally by them in December can be negotiated (amongst other things around the organization of work, overtime and holidays), but the decision itself is not up for discussion. The reduction of public funding by the government remains in force. If the union leaders were to accept such a restrictive framework, the strike will finally have been for nothing, despite all the effort made. Meanwhile further negotiations will continue until the end of February, and there will be no new action on the rail.

However, what is at stake in the conflict at the SNCB is much more fundamental than just the struggle for social rights and working conditions of thousands of workers on the rail. Governments and rail management want to also neutralise a bastion of union power, which in past actions has played an important role, and want to make use of the conflict at the railways to put through measures related to "minimum service", which later can be applied in other sectors. If this succeeds it means a serious defeat for the entire trade union movement. Moreover, it opens the way for the further privatization of the railways, to the detriment of staff and users.

The deep malaise in the trade union movement hasn't come out of thin air.

First there was the giving up, without any positive result, of the action plan that by the end of 2014 had given hundreds of thousands of members and activists renewed hope, and also outside and around the trade union

movement had encouraged social resistance (as witnessed by among other things, the impact that the 'Heart over Hard' campaign had had in Flanders), in exchange for the reopening of collective bargaining, which in turn has achieved little that is positive for the working population.

Then the capitulation in Greece of the Tsipras government, which for months across Europe had restored hope in the possibility to at least start a break with dominant neoliberal austerity policies, came as a new blow to left-wing activists and the broader labour movement.

The attacks in Paris and the subsequent security policy, the ubiquitous racism, the resurgence of the far right in many countries, etc. meant in France and Belgium not only a huge damper on the social struggle, planned climate action, and much more, but also offered an undreamed of excuse for the leadership bodies of the ABVV and the ACV to completely shut down further planned actions in the context of an increasingly hollowed out "action plan".

The background to this is formed by an important strategic debate, or rather a series of connected strategic debates being held as much as possible by the leadership of ACV and ABVV behind closed doors, when in fact it concerns every union leadership body, every activist, indeed all members and broader layers of the population.

This involves questions such as:

- What is the remaining role of social dialogue, if over many years it has become clear that in national and sectoral inter-professional agreements fewer and fewer gains have been obtained for workers, many negotiations just being allowed to discuss marginal changes to savings plans made by the Government and with a right-wing government that wants to give less and less consideration to the results of such consultations?
- Should the unions in the first place serve to organize resistance against the policies of social cuts, or do they need to cooperate with the demolition policy, in particular by advising that certain services should be targeted (e.g. help with finding jobs for the unemployed, career advice, more "individual" services, etc.)?
- If full support to social resistance is to be given, with what plan of action? And does this mean to go if necessary for the fall of the right-wing government? Or should we abandon this policy, in anticipation of the 2019 elections? Which alternatives should be put forward for this government for which policies? What about the measures already taken, including by the previous Di Rupo government (e.g. measures related to pensions, waiting benefit, the suspension of unemployed young people, etc.)?
- If a form of political alternative is proposed, what role should trade unions should take in it? As usual, and with fewer results, should there be reliance on the old political friends of the PS, SP.A and CD & V, or should there be the taking of or support for autonomous political initiatives?

These debates cross the entire trade union movement, in Flanders and Wallonia. Even though there is a tendency amongst a number of bureaucrats, substantially supported by the media and nearly all parties in Parliament (with the exception of the PVDA) to make this discussion a communal conflict by making an issue of "Flemish consultation trade unionism" versus "Walloon conflict trade unionism," it would be in our view a major weakening of the unions to go down this road.

Meanwhile, of course, governments, employers and the right are not sitting still, on the contrary, their offensive is going further day after day. Moreover, the climate after the attacks in Paris and the inaction and division in the camp of the working population just makes them more self-assured and arrogant.

Thus Maggie De Block continues to be an outspoken advocate of a policy of sanctions against the long-term sick who refuse to go back to work, all agreements between unions and bosses at the Group of 10 notwithstanding. Thus Bart De Wever and the VBO advocate a new round of hefty cuts in social security (and not only on the operating costs of the trade unions in managing unemployment records). At the same time billions are being found for new spending on the military and police. The bosses are at the same time getting favourable measures one after the other as gifts at the expense of social security or taxes.

The measures taken in the context of counter-terrorism policy will additionally introduce a whole package of repressive legislation, which can be used partly and easily against activists and trade unionists. Also concerning the right to strike, the right to picket, etc., there are many threats hanging in the air, which could be easily carried out in the current climate.

The return of the communal issue in the political field, primarily because of the N-VA, also enhances the risk of splitting the unions or major parts of it along communal lines.

In the political arena the trade union movement can hardly count on old "political friends": a lot of SP.A leaders avoided supporting the recent railway strike, Mohammed Redouani, the heir of Tobback in Leuven even bluntly advocated the splitting of ACOD-Rail and the breaking away of the Flemish wing from the "union extremists". The Greens want to more and more explicitly profile themselves as a party for small SMEs and have never had much sympathy with the trade union movement and its demands.

Only the PTB / PVDA takes up the defence of the social demands in the federal and regional parliaments, and actively initiates proposals in the area. But the PVDA has on the one hand no real understanding of what the trade union bureaucracy is, namely a social layer within the workers' movement which by its specific social position has different interests to the mass of the members. Not that this makes the trade union bureaucracy an homogeneous whole of course, also in here there is a "left" and a "right", there are more and less militant elements. On the other hand the PVDA tries to become the voice of "the whole trade union movement" instead of Social or Christian Democracy, but fundamentally still respects the same division of responsibilities with the union bureaucracy [as the other parties]: they are the "social area", the party "the political area", where both sides leave each other alone. Together, this makes sure that today it is generally in public passive and makes very little criticism of the union leaderships and does not succeed to push for a credible alternative to the current impasse.

It is no longer five minutes to midnight any more for the trade unions and the social resistance, but is now actually midnight. A rapid, profound change of course is therefore urgently needed, not only to safeguard what is left of social gains, but also in order to rescue the unions as organizations for the immediate (and less immediate) interests of the working people, and not simply as "service giving" extensions of government policy.

How to get out of the impasse?

– First, it should be clear that we only will make progress through a broad democratic debate throughout the trade union movement, from top to bottom. Here a balance must be drawn up of the Action Plan and the results achieved so far (or rather not) without there being any taboo subjects, and the role of the way that the unions have acted in this. The upcoming trade union congresses should certainly be seized as an opportunity to do so, but there is need for more. These conferences should at least be prepared for by broad activist meetings everywhere.

– In our view, there is a need for a new action plan, which once more has a logical, understandable and clear structure, with clear milestones and objectives, around clear and broad-based demands. Again, it is important that

wide discussion take place and positions are worked out collectively, starting with meetings in the workplace. We think that demanding the reversal of all anti-social measures already taken is necessary, only trying to prevent "still worse" problems is not sufficient. Where this hits a brick wall with the government, we should not shy away from going for the fall of the right-wing governments.

– Both in ACV and ABVV, both in Flanders and Wallonia and Brussels, there are people at all levels of the trade union movement who defended such perspectives and continue to defend them. Today, the trade union left, however, is not at all organized. To carry weight in the debate and go for a majority in the trade union movement, the structuring into a network of this trade union left that can take joint initiatives is indispensable. In 2016 let's put forward joint steps in this direction.

– The presence of the PVDA / PTB in the federal, Walloon and Brussels parliaments, the support to the social demands and the trade unions that its MPs and activists give, have certainly an important added value for the social resistance. However, the PVDA alone cannot form the political alternative that the trade unions and social movements need. We remain convinced of the need for the left of the trade union movement to come forward with their own political initiatives, in order to achieve a broader, pluralistic anti-capitalist political force. The call of the ABVV in Charleroi in 2012 was a first step in that direction. The PVDA could deliver a significant and positive contribution to the shaping of such a force, if they so wish, and if they would be willing to self-critically examine a number of their current views.

What we outline above is certainly no easy approach, where success and victories are guaranteed. On the contrary, there are enough pitfalls and obstacles. But in our view it is the only approach that can open a way out of the current morass in which the labour movement and the left is in danger of sinking. Plenty of work in front of us then, let's go forward with as many people as possible.

Translation by Seán Collins