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Belgium

Towards a major trial of strength

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The 24-hour strike which mobilized the Belgian working class on Monday, 15 December was an enormous success. The country was completely paralysed: in Flanders, in Wallonia and in Brussels, in the private and public sectors, in industry and the services, transport and the trade, the big and small companies. Such a massive movement has not been seen since the strike of November 1993 (a 24-hour strike against the “global plan”) but, unlike that one, the strike of 15 December should not remain uncompleted.

Organized in a common front of trade unions (FGTB, CSC, CGSLB), this strike is (for the moment) the last stage of an action plan against the austerity plans of the rightwing government resulting from the elections of 25 May 2014. Launched as of the installation of the coalition led by Charles Michel, this action plan started with a mass demonstration (130,000 participating) on 6 November in Brussels and continued with a series of rotating strikes by province (24/11, 1/12 and 8/12). The mobilization grew at each stage

In 2011 the government directed by the PS struck hard against workers

To understand the events, the political context should be pointed out. In Belgium, the attacks against workers have been going on for 25 years coming governments in which the social democrats participate. After the long political crisis following the 2010 , marked by the victory in Flanders of the NVA, the SP Prime Minister estimated that “to save the country” it had to step up these attacks, so that the Flemish traditional right could beat the neoliberal-nationalists and that the coalition with social democracy could be continued.

This policy - which cost the workers the trifling sum of 20 billion Euros - was a terrible fiasco. Last May, the return of the coalition seemed the most likely option. But, to general surprise, the French-speaking Liberal party, put into the saddle by the Palace, formed a homogeneous rightwing coalition with the Flemish Christian Democrat , the Flemish Liberals and the NVA. This latter agreed to keep quiet on its separatist , in return for an ultra-neoliberal program.

Today the rightwing government wants to break the existing social model since 1945

On the socio-economic level, the programme of the Charles Michel government continues and deepens the austerity imposed by its predecessor. There is a new cuts cure, to the tune of 11 billion euros. Wage-earners, civil servant, recipients of social benefits, pensioners, the sick and disabled, job-seekers and asylum seekers...: are all hit very hard, in particular young people and the women.

The leader of the NVA, Bart De Wever, describes himself as the political arm of the VOKA, the association of Flemish employers. He is not a minister but he sets the tone. This whole government seems to be at the service of the bosses, with an essential mission: to push the trade unions into a corner, to radically reduce their weight in the political life and society in general. The mainstream media actively collaborate in this project: on the subject of the 15 December strike in particular, they poured out torrents of vicious propaganda against the strikers and the trade unions.

The Belgian trade union movement is not very politicized, focused on class collaboration (“dialogue”), but extremely massive (3.5 million members in a population of 10 million) and very well organized. From day to day, it rests on the activity of tens of thousands of activists, delegates and organizers. These cadres have understood that they were confronted with something new: an attempt to qualitatively change the power relations in society. The old project of a strong state has been brought back onto the agenda, and at the centre the desire to make the right to strike an empty formula.

Several tens of thousands of trade-union activists organize the fight on the ground

It was the consciousness of this danger as much as the indignation of the activists about the social cutbacks which pushed the trade-union leaderships to link up and propose a true action plan, and this plan in its turn encouraged the activists to go into the action with growing energy and enthusiasm. Tens of thousands of men and women have mobilized and organized flying strikes, blockings of roads, industrial blockings of zonings, in all the areas of the country.

The movement enjoys extremely broad support in public opinion. This was already seen at the time of the 6 November demonstration and has only increased since. This support has taken shape in particular in the formation of broad coalitions bringing artists, intellectuals and actors which have contributed to delegitimizing the austerity policy. The current is turning at the ideological level. The revelations of the far-right past of several NVA ministers has played a part at this level, but the essential point is the rejection of social injustice, symbolized in the fact that Belgium is a tax haven for rich people and a tax hell for the others.

Six months after the elections, the Flemish regional government led by the NVA (which has also imposed drastic cuts) is only supported by approximately 35% of the population. All the levels of government are discredited, including the Walloon executive led by social democracy, whose policy of “rigour” is no different from “the federal austerity”. The PS dreamed it would change its profile in opposition, but the current climate of toughening and rising consciousness has prevented such a change in opinion.

The trade-union common front raised four demands:

- maintaining and increasing buying power through freedom to negotiate and the suppression ending of wage indexation,
- strong federal social security,
- investment in the revival of long-term employment including in quality public services,
- tax justice.

This platform is insufficient (it does not oppose retirement at 67 nor measures leading to mass exclusion from the ranks of the registered unemployed imposed by the previous coalition government). But the government cannot yield on any of them. From an economic point of view, it could give up the ending of wage-indexation, whose effect for businesses is in fact very small. But from a political point of view, this retreat would be interpreted as a brand of weakness which would compromise its project. It could also promise a readjustment of taxation, but it would be only elementary justice, and would not make it possible to justify the new sacrifices imposed on workers.

The trade-union leaderships cannot go to their base without any real gains given the confidence it has gained thanks to the fight. They are currently trying to reenter dialogue with the employers' associations, proposing to adopt a joint "roadmap" to present to the government on competitiveness of businesses, wages and retirement conditions, in particular. But this scenario is unlikely to occur. In any case, the government is very clear this roadmap will have to fit into its programme.

Towards a major confrontation

Everything is thus pointing in the direction of a major confrontation. The semi-spontaneous outbreak of a general strike on the model of 1960-61 is not the most probable scenario in the short run. But, if the government makes parliament vote on its measures in the next few days, the trade unions will have to continue and radicalize their action plan, which will mean for them riding the tiger. In this case, and provided that trade-union unity is maintained, many things will become possible.

The radical left is enjoying a considerable echo, but the convergence dynamic started with the 25 May elections did not continue. This is partly the result of a choice of the PTB to count above all on building itself, in a social democrat type relationship with the trade unions (by keeping its distance from the call of the FGTB of Charleroi [1]). But there are also different orientations and demands in the movement: unlike the PTB, the LCR defends the idea that it is necessary to drive out the Michel government as quickly as possible, and to begin a debate in the trade unions on an anticapitalist action plan, from the point of view of the fight for a social government.

15 December 2014

[1] See [The LCR, the radical left and the Charleroi Appeal](#).