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Belgium

# The LCR, the radical left and the Charleroi Appeal

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**All the left political organisations support the appeal of the Charleroi FGTB, all were enthusiastically present on April 27, 2013 at the day of struggle it organised jointly with the CNE, and all participate fraternally in the support committee that has been meeting monthly since January 2013.**

There are however some nuances. Generally, most organisations seem to have initially underestimated the importance of the speech by Daniel Piron on May 1, 2012. Many of them only remembered the denunciation of the PS. Then, recognizing their error, the organisations generally tried to take the approach of the trades unionists as an illustration of their own programme and strategy. It was still insufficient because the union left goes further: it intends to itself determine a programme and advance its own strategy for regroupment, so that this programme finds a credible political expression.

## “A class party”

The LCR-SAP was well positioned to approach this situation. During its congress in November 2011, the Belgian section of the Fourth International had adopted a political resolution which anticipated the possibility that trade union sectors would seek a new political expression, alternative to social democracy. Notably it stated: “The international process of transformation of social democracy from reformist parties into social liberal parties constitutes a gigantic step backwards for the class independence of workers on the political level. This step backwards weighs negatively on the relationship of forces. We ask the trade union movement to take responsibility by breaking links with the PS/Sp.a and by actively favouring the formation of a new party of labour to defend the class interests of the exploited and oppressed”.

Later, this text specifies: “The foundation of a class party requires a struggle of the trade union left against “pure trades unionism”. The latter erects an artificial wall between the trade union struggles of workers and political action, an area reserved to “professionals”, that is to the “political friends” who are thus given carte blanche. The formation of a class party involves the overthrow of this wall erected by the bureaucratic apparatuses, so as to allow the exploited to practice politics themselves.”

## Open letter

Two months later, as the government of Socialist Prime Minister Di Rupo launched its first wave of attacks, the LCR-SAP published an “open letter to trades unionists” which ended thus: “The trade unions no longer have political or media relays. They can only count on their own strength, those of two and a half million members. This is a considerable strength. Thanks to this strength, the unions can impose another policy. But this will not be possible with a unionism of bureaucratic command, nor in a climate of competition between organizations. To win, it is necessary to inform and mobilise the membership in depth so as to implement an action plan leading to the general strike, in the broadest unity between organisations, between sectors, in the north and the south.

“If trades unionism does not choose the road of opposition, it will be at the mercy of the dominant class. The latter wishes to ensure it a future, but solely as service provider. In this case, we will no longer have the trades unions with which the working class has struggled for its gains. We will have a pseudo-union accompanying neoliberal policies,

indeed a transmission belt with which the employers and the government will maintain social peace. We already have an example of it, unhappily, in certain enterprises.

"In this case also, the political balance will continue to move towards the right. After some time, an unabashed right wing government will come to power with the strength to attack trade union organization itself head on, like the new right wing government of Rajoy in Spain.

"If it chooses the road of opposition through struggle, if it assumes openly that it has no more "friends" and fights for another politics, trades unionism should not only mobilize wage earners: it must also follow its logic to the end and pose the question of an alternative politics. The trade union cannot obviously transform itself into a party. It should remain independent of any party and continue to represent the mass of workers, whatever their political, philosophical and religious opinions. However, the trade union can and must favour the formation of an alternative politics. It can and must demand of those who identify with labour at the political level that they unite together around a left programme. It can and must demand that this alternative is as faithful to the world of labour as the current parties are faithful to capital.

"We, the LCR, fight for an anti-capitalist, internationalist, feminist, democratic and ecosocialist programme. We think that the union leadership carries a heavy responsibility: their policy of dialogue has played the game of the employers and led trades unionism into a dead end. We propose another, anti-capitalist, policy: breaking the power of finance by nationalising the credit sector and that of energy. But our fight is not separate from that of the workers' movement. We have no interests different from those of the mass of workers. The latter are in great danger because trades unionism is in great danger. We call them to struggle. We will be in the front line alongside them, to defend trades unionism and social benefits, to impose the pure and simple rejection of the government's austerity plan. And we will take our responsibilities on the political terrain. If the trade union decides it, we are ready to participate in the construction of a political alternative, a party of the world of labour against capital".

## Popularisation

This text has had a certain echo. In particular in Charleroi, where a delegation from the LCR was twice received by the permanent committee of the FGTB in early 2012. The LCR then immediately took on the task of popularising the approach of the Charleroi unionists, and has spared no effort in doing so. A blog was created. In June 2012, Daniel Piron participated in a debate between unionists at the spring anti-capitalist school of the Formation Lesoil (a permanent education organization linked to the LCR). In autumn of the same year, the Formation Lesoil organised another significant debate in Liege, historic bastion of the FGTB, between Piron and the metalworkers' leader. Meanwhile, our site and newspaper questioned a number of trade union leaders about their position on the Charleroi appeal. Finally, in March 2013, Daniel Piron was invited to debate the president of the PTB, Peter Mertens, again in the context of the spring anti-capitalist school.

## Moving the lines

No other left organisation has produced such an analysis or carried out such activity. The reason is to be found in the significance of strategic schemas based on the separation of the social/trade union on the one hand and politics on the other "with the "leading role of the party" (self-proclaimed) being key. The caricature of this attitude is provided by the Mouvement de gauche of Bernard Wesphael (a dissident Green Party parliamentarian, imprudently supported by Jean-Luc Mélenchon), which has tried to impose itself as the sole alternative and align everyone behind its flag. While supporting the Charleroi Appeal, the Communist Party and the PSL (CIO-CWI) do not however give the

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impression of having grasped the extent of the change desired by Daniel Piron and his comrades. As for the PTB, in spite of its Stalinist heritage, it seems paradoxically to grasp the stakes better, in particular since April 27, but its desire to establish itself as the relay for the trade union movement as a whole (left and right together) does not facilitate the task when it comes to taking initiatives.

If the trades unionists maintain their orientation, it is probable that the lines will continue to move in the right direction. The LCR-SAP wants that to happen and, despite its limited forces, will take its responsibilities to see that it does.