

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3149>



Belgium

# Class trades unionism seeks political expression

- IV Online magazine - 2013 - IV465 - October 2013 -

Publication date: Thursday 17 October 2013

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**In the social and political history of Belgium, May 1, 2012 could perhaps mark a milestone. On that day the leaders of the Charleroi regional branch of the socialist trade union FGTB – the second biggest in the country, with 102,000 members – publicly broke with the social democratic party and called for a rallying of the left to the perspective of a new broad, anti-capitalist force to the left of the PS and the Greens. An unprecedented thunder bolt... and not without consequences.**

Mayday speeches in Belgium are generally unsurprising but like all rules, this has its exceptions. On May 1, 2012, in Charleroi, a big stone was thrown in the water by Daniel Piron, the inter-professional regional secretary of the FGTB. Before stunned and furious social democratic leaders, and in the presence of several hundred enthusiastic trades unionists, Piron denounced the austerity policies with which the PS has collaborated for 25 years without a break [Belgium can only be governed by coalition governments. Between 1982 and 1987, the social democrats were out of power. Since 1987 they have participated in all the federal coalitions and also lead the Walloon regional government]]. However, the most spectacular aspect of this speech was not the denunciation of the role of the social democrats in coalition governments with the right, but rather the explicit call for the construction of an anti-capitalist political alternative, to the left of the PS and the Ecolo party.

Those who believed it was an individual outburst without consequence, or a manoeuvre to benefit the FGTB in the context of the forthcoming works council elections were wrong. Not only did Piron reiterate his call a year later, in the name of all the professional union federations of his region, but also meanwhile he and his comrades had passed into action. In two directions : the debate inside the trade union movement and the left in general, on the one hand, and the call for political regrouping of left forces on the other.

## A broad echo

The appeal by Daniel Piron and his comrades had a broad echo among trades unionists. The factions of the FGTB apparatus linked to the PS and the line of the “lesser evil” have certainly abstained from any public comment, but several left union leaders have expressed themselves openly. While not completely sharing the conclusions of the Charleroi comrades, the characterisation of PS policies as neoliberal is very broadly shared. In his editorials, the president of the Francophone union federation of metalworkers, the FGTB (67, 000 members), Nico Cue, has made a speciality of denouncing these policies and the change of regime which accompanies it. During a public debate with Daniel Piron in the FGTB offices in Liege, Cue confirmed that the union movement “had a huge need of a left political alternative, a real anti-capitalist alternative”. “The left organisations should overcome their divisions”, he added [\[1\]](#).

Daniel Richard, inter-professional secretary of the Verviers regional organisation of the FGTB, adds: “It is the role of the union, and even its *raison d’être*, not only to defend the works at the level of the workplaces, but also to impose another policy.(...) I think that it is necessary to have, to the left of the PS and Ecolo, a more significant political force, better structured, more credible and unitary than what currently exists. And I encourage a left front, sharing and forwarding at the political level the programme of demands of the Walloon FGTB for example” [\[2\]](#)

More explicit support came from the general secretary of a trade union organization of the Confédération des syndicats chrétiens (CSC – Confederation of Christian Trade Unions), the Centrale nationale des employés (CNE,

160, 000 members). Known for his anti-neoliberal positions and involvement in the European Altersummit, Felipe Van Keirsbilck told the newspaper "la Gauche" that he was "absolutely in agreement with what I believe to be the two bases of this call from the FGTB of Charleroi. (...) On the one hand, (...) without having partisan links, in the CNE we fully agree in saying that the trade unions need a political expression". On the other hand, "it is clear that a left political force is needed (...) which is sufficiently radical to face the situation. (...) The radicalism of the austerity policies means that we need a political party which is ready to confront the Troika, the neoliberal dogmas, the single system of thought, the policies of the European Commission which are exclusively at the service of capital and the destruction of social benefits" [3].

## From speech to deeds

"If you don't go for what you want, you will never have it; if you don't ask, the reply will always be no; if you don't go forward, you will always stay in the same place". What distinguishes the FGTB unionists in Charleroi is that they follow these three simple rules, as pertinent in politics as in love. Once the works council elections and communal elections were over, all the political organizations to the left of the PS and Ecolo held an initial meeting in January 2013. A representative of the CNE attended the meeting, mandated by their union. A support committee for the appeal of May 1, 2012 was set up. During the meetings, a first concrete project emerged: to organize in Charleroi, one year later, a day of struggle and debate on the need for a political alternative.

On April 27, 2013, 400 people responded to the invitation of the Charleroi FGTB, the CNE and the support committee. The text distributed on this occasion said notably: "This system cannot be reformed. It must disappear. But simply affirming this is not enough. We still need to give ourselves the means and political relays to concretise our objective. A political relay of a new type which is based on social resistance and strengthens it: that is what we need to build to give hope back to the world of labour, Some think that it would be possible to "weigh" on the PS and Ecolo so that they once again become parties of the left. It's an illusion. We prefer to invite the left activists of the PS and Ecolo to join us in building an alternative together. (...) Our ambition is not to compose and dilute ourselves in power. It is to oppose until the time when we can impose an alternative worth of this name."

The debates were launched by representatives of the two organisations, Daniel Piron and Isabelle Wanschoor. Rank and file activists then witnessed to the ravages of austerity among rail workers, teachers, and the unemployed. Finally, Piron read messages of support from Pierre Laurent (Parti de la gauche européenne), Olivier Besancenot (Nouveau parti anticapitaliste, France) and director Ken Loach ("You are right, we need new parties"). The participants then broke up into working groups to exchange views in a very constructive atmosphere, and discuss the working perspectives to adopt. At the end of the day, the latter were summarised as follows by the organisers: to broaden the initiative, link up with similar initiatives outside Belgium, approach the associations, the cultural and academic world, and above all "all those who suffer today". The support committee was charged with drawing up a plan of action, but also an emergency anti-capitalist plan, to be submitted to a subsequent meeting.

## Without precedent

It was necessary to await this day of April 27, 2013 for the mass media and commentators finally to take the affair seriously. It should be said in fairness to them that the approach of the FGTB in Charleroi is unprecedented. The Belgian workers' movement is characterised by the existence of massive trade unions (more than two million members) which leave the monopoly of political expression to their social democratic or Christian democratic "friends". This division of labour and the under-politicisation which flows from it are the results of history. In 1898, the

ancestor of the FGTB was created as the "Trade Union Commission" of the social democratic party, the POB. After the general strike of 1936, this Commission gave way to the Confédération générale du travail de Belgique (CGTB), whose affiliates were automatically members of the party. As the president of the POB, De Man, had taken a position in favour of the New Order, the social democratic grip was weakened during the Nazi occupation. Thus, in 1945, the CGTB merged with organisations of underground resistance origin. The FGTB dates from this time. It is formally independent of the PS, but its leaders sit as observers on the Party bureau and the latter controls the Action Commune Socialiste which, since 1949, groups all the social organisations of the "socialist column" [4].

It isn't the first time that trade union sectors have broken with social democracy. André Renard, leader of the Liege metalworkers, did so after the general strike of 1960-61. But Renard only created a hybrid movement, neither party nor union (the Mouvement populaire wallon), that ended up in the dead end a fight for federalism cut off from anti-capitalist demands, so that its existence was ephemeral. The appeal of the FGTB of Charleroi is the very first time that union bodies of such a level of responsibility have favoured the emergence of a political alternative, and it should be specified that they do it in an explicit rejection of "Walloon isolationism". This development is then qualitative and of great importance. Several factors contribute to explaining it.

## Why there, why now?

First, some local specificities should be noted. Two of them are linked. The first: the local PS was up to its neck in corruption, to the point that a mayor and several deputies have been jailed. The second: social democracy has increasingly lost its ability to control the trade unions. When the old union leadership, traditionally very right wing, retired, a new generation of union cadres emerged almost simultaneously in the leadership of the professional and inter-professional federations. This generation was marked by a series of testing struggles: the fight of the steelworkers in Clabecq against closure, the long strike of AGC glassworkers against job losses (denounced by the PS as "a stain" on Wallonia), and movements of resistance against neoliberal policies in the public sector, notably in rail. A team was formed, which drew on the lessons of these experiences, notably concerning relations with social democracy: in May 2010, the FGTB in Charleroi held a congress of political orientation during which it decided to institute regular links with all the organisations of the democratic left. Since then, it has no longer participated in Action commune socialiste and organises its own Mayday demonstration every year

France, Greece, Spain: the international conjuncture has given ideas to trades unionists in Charleroi. In his speech on May 1, 2012, Daniel Piron had cited the example of the Front de gauche in France. "Yes, the example of the Front de gauche in France has inspired us. Yes, it has given our activists an extraordinary hope. Yes, we identify with the essence of the programme defended by Mélenchon". At the time the presidential campaign of Jean-Luc Mélenchon enthused numerous Walloon trades unionists. Several hundred of them, notably in Charleroi, came to Lille to participate in his meeting on March 27, 2012. The general tonality of the Front de gauche campaign and its programme seemed in synch with the hopes of an alternative in Belgium. In his speech, the regional secretary of the Charleroi FGTB nuanced his support, however: "It is not however the case that we can apply a cut and paste in Belgium. We are concerned moreover at Mélenchon's support for the formation freshly emerged from the ranting of Bernard Wesphael, which divide the left a little more again and all this without any anti-capitalist basis" [5]. Does this denunciation explain why Mélenchon did not respond to the invitation of the FGTB Charleroi to organize a meeting with him in the context of the communal elections?

But the basic reason for the trade union radicalisation is the exhaustion of the margins of manoeuvre of social democracy. The PS and its Flemish equivalent the Sp.a have participated in all the coalition governments with the right since 1987. It goes without saying that the policies of these governments have been neoliberal. The social democratic leaders claim that their participation allows them to limit the damage, and even to implement some trade

union demands, but this is no longer credible, notably because the PS does not conceal its hostility to the mobilisations, demonstrations and strikes that the FGTB organizes against the employers and the government. That is why Daniel Piron was strongly applauded on May 1, 2012, when he said: "Today, comrades of the PS, the politics of the lesser evil will no longer impress our activists. The magic phrase "it would be worst without us" offends their intelligence".

## Social regression

Discontent has only grown since the formation of the current government, led by Elio Di Rupo. Belgium had not had a socialist prime minister since the very short (six months) reign of the Leburton government, in 1974. The trades unionists, who really believed that the PS did its utmost in the context of coalitions where it did not have the upper hand, and who thus hoped that a team led by a "socialist" would allow a certain number of advances, were quickly disillusioned. The Di Rupo government, since its formation, has led a vast offensive of social regression which sought to pay the bill for the bailing out of the banks, on the one hand, and to tie the Belgian economy to German levels of competitiveness on the other.

A wage freeze imposed by law until 2018, massive exclusions of the unemployed, lengthening of professional careers, dismantling of the status of civil servants, manipulation of the index and other painful measures contrasting sharply with the impotence displayed towards the multinationals (Mittal and Ford), or the fierce defence of the arrangements which make Belgium a tax haven for the rich (notional interest rates, banking secrecy, no registry of wealth). In fact, the attack which has continued since late 2011 has been almost as brutal as that launched by the government of the right alone in 1982-87. And, as at that time, the trade unions who do not accept the neoliberal diktats are deprived of consultation.

## Crisis of the "Belgian model"

This situation tends to put the "Belgian model" in crisis. On the Francophone side, the existence of the FGTB underpins the link between the PS and its popular social base, and this link explains in turn the astonishing durability of the PS, which remains the biggest party in Francophone Belgium. More broadly, whether socialist or Christian, this mass trades unionism at a low political level, accepting the pre-eminence of the parties is a token of stability and control over the working class. But this "model" can only function if there is "social dialogue" and the parties relay effectively at least some of the trade union demands. Without that, the situation of the trade union cadres becomes untenable and leaves them at the end of the day only two possibilities:

â€" either to accept a substantial reduction of trade union weight in society in general and in the workplaces in particular;

â€" or to challenge the model, which would involve both breaking with the trade unionism of dialogue and seeking new political relays.

This question of political relays was approached by André Renard in the context of the post-war boom. Today, faced with the systemic crisis of globalized capital and the key role of the European Union in the offensive against social benefits, the anarcho-syndicalism of Renard is no longer relevant. The alternative must be both at the political and trade union levels. As the president of the Charleroi FGTB metalworkers, Antonio Cocciolo, has put it: "Greece is a veritable laboratory for the parties of the European right (...). We are today in Greece almost on the 37th day of the inter-professional strike (...). And (...) we are not seeing a change of political orientation. As a union leader I am obliged to analyse this kind of thing. I think that we need, today more than ever, political organisations close to the workers, to the people, capable of mobilising. On this level, the approach made by the FGTB Charleroi Sud-Hainaut

on May 1, Mai 2012 is the culmination of the following analysis and reflection: political relays are needed, a political transmission belt which can help the mobilisation and capacity of union organisations to halt the demolition of social benefits. Yes to trade union organisation! Yes to a strengthening of combative trades unionism! But also on the other hand we need a political , legislative, voice, which can lead the political battle in the democratic institutions taking account of the aspirations of the working people (...)" [6].

## A complex process

In the context of the crisis of the Belgian model of dialogue and integration of the workers' movement, the Charleroi initiative can only resonate with the processes of political recomposition underway in the union movement as a whole. But the complexity of the situation and the double cleavage of FGTB/CSC, Flanders/Wallonia means a long process involving mediations as well as tactics allowing the different stages to be traversed.

On the one hand, the echo of the appeal concerns almost exclusively the Francophone part of the country. The Flemish trades unionists of the FGTB are certainly unhappy with the policies of the social democrats and 700 of them have shown this by signing an open letter to their union leadership demanding a break with the Sp.a. But this initiative has remained without consequence, notably because the FGTB is very much in the minority in Flanders in relation to the CSC (where the debate on political relays is only carried on in minority circles) and that the trade union movement as a whole in the north of the country operates in a political landscape completely hegemonized by the right and the far right.

On the other hand, the support of the CNE is important but the leaders of this union are obliged to take account of the fact that the other professional union federations of the CSC are very far from sharing their viewpoint: they cannot then allow themselves to commit like Piron and his comrades. Also, in spite of the excellent collaboration between the CNE and the FGTB of Charleroi in the organisation of April 27, an old "anti-Papist" base subsists in the socialist union, which the social democrats tend to exploit.

## Discordance of the times

Trades unionists in Charleroi are highly conscious of these difficulties. That is why they insist systematically on the fact that their initiative is a long term project, which involves a fundamental debate inside the trade union organizations. To fuel this debate, they have produced a pamphlet in 10,000 copies, in which they respond to eight questions concerning their approach. Tactically, the problem for them is to continue advancing concretely towards their objective "a new left wing political force" without isolating themselves by a premature initiative, notably on the electoral level. Indeed, the question is complicated because there is a social emergency and 2014 will see three simultaneous elections (European, federal and regional) which will be decisive for presenting an anti-capitalist alternative to social democracy and attempting to break its monopoly of the parliamentary representation of the left. That will be all the more important inasmuch as the objective of the PS and Sp.a is to win over the traditional Flemish right from the liberal nationalist NVA by showing that class collaboration remains the best means of imposing austerity, and that the latter can thus be imposed more surely in the federal context than by a new state reform which would threaten the country with institutional chaos. The prize for the social democrats is hold power, for four years "for all the governments at all levels will henceforth be "de legislature" [7].

At the same time that they give the maximum of concessions to the right, the PS and Sp.a mobilise the trade union bureaucracy to close ranks around the "useful vote" and the politics of the "lesser evil". They feel threatened on the left by the Parti du travail de Belgique (PTB-PVDA – Worker's Party of Belgium) and wish to avoid opposition to the

neoliberal policy that they will carry out during the next legislature being expressed inside Parliament. A formation of Maoist and Stalinist origin, the PTB-PVDA has succeeded in winning election to the communal councils of some working class areas where it has set up medical centres providing free health care. Some years ago, noting that they had not succeeded in making a breakthrough, they decided to change their image, and to a certain extent their strategy, so as to appear as less “extremist” and divisive of the left. At the same time, they improved their media operations. In spite of a few slips, this has succeeded. At the communal and provincial elections of October 2012, the party did well in several big towns in Flanders and Wallonia as well as in two communes in the Brussels conurbation, In Antwerp it obtained 7.96% (four elected representatives) and beat the Open VLD list (5.57 %, two elected representatives) led by the Justice minister, Annemie Turtelboom. In the Liege region, it won four seats in Herstal, five in Seraing (where it is now the second biggest party after the PS), two in Liege and one in Flémalle. In these two provinces, in particular Liege, its scores allow it to hope to cross the threshold of eligibility at the parliamentary elections.

## Articulating the short and medium term

The question is posed of articulating the medium term combat launched by the Charleroi trades unionists and the short term electoral struggle against social democracy. The PTB, because of its success, bears a major responsibility here. Only it can hope to gain parliamentary representation. But it is not sure of doing so, because the pressure for the useful vote will be enormous. The PS will dramatise to the maximum the threat of division of the country so as to establish itself as the last rampart protecting social security. In these conditions, the interests of the left and of the PTB would be that the latter makes a proposal which takes account of its legitimate concern to maintain its own existence, gains and visibility, while creating the conditions for a broad campaign, involving activists from other political currents, the associative world and the trade union left. Such a campaign would be a support to the Charleroi unionists and an encouragement to others who, while sharing their analysis, today hesitate to commit themselves. What will the PTB do? Follow the sectarian tradition which runs like a red thread through its innumerable political zigzags? Will it attempt to justify itself by reducing the appeal of the Charleroi unionists to the umpteenth attempt at unifying the “little left”? Or will it take the unprecedented opportunity to finally begin to contest social democratic hegemony at the very heart of the organised workers’ movement, in the trade union base, by contributing to restructuring the latter around an anti-capitalist axis? In the short term, that is the key question.

As Felipe Van Keirsbilck of the CNE puts it: “The PTB represents something today. We salute it! And we salute also the proof that in the electorate there is an aspiration to a policy other than the micro-nuances of neoliberalism. Now, the scenario is not fixed in advance. If the PTB can consider that the political and historical stakes posed today in Belgium and Europe justify an opening (...) then (its) electoral victory in the communal elections could accelerate the constitution of a significant left force, democratic and ecosocialist, supportive of trade union mobilisations and radical in the sense that it defends the interest of the great majority of the population (...). Now the opposite scenario is also possible. The successes of the PTB can go to its head and let it believe that its campaigns of propaganda, albeit generally very well done, can bring it from 3 % to 5 %, then one fine day from 5 % to 7 %. If that is the case, it would not take into account the historic urgency which faces us” [8].

The response to these questions is one of the major issues of the social and electoral calendar for 2013-2014.

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[1] [http://www.lcr-lagauche.be/cm/index.php?view=article&id=2527:lappel-de-la-ftgb-de-charleroi-a-resonne-a-liege-&option=com\\_content&Itemid=53](http://www.lcr-lagauche.be/cm/index.php?view=article&id=2527:lappel-de-la-ftgb-de-charleroi-a-resonne-a-liege-&option=com_content&Itemid=53)

[2]

[http://www.lcr-lagauche.be/cm/index.php?view=article&id=2472:entretien-avec-daniel-richard-secretaire-interprofessionnel-de-la-fgtb-de-verviers&option=com\\_content&Itemid=53](http://www.lcr-lagauche.be/cm/index.php?view=article&id=2472:entretien-avec-daniel-richard-secretaire-interprofessionnel-de-la-fgtb-de-verviers&option=com_content&Itemid=53)

[3]

[http://www.lcr-lagauche.be/cm/index.php?view=article&id=2658:lvivement-un-grand-parti-de-gauche-r-une-interview-de-felipe-van-keirsbilck-secretaire-general-de-la-centrale-nationale-des-employes-cne-csc&option=com\\_content&Itemid=53](http://www.lcr-lagauche.be/cm/index.php?view=article&id=2658:lvivement-un-grand-parti-de-gauche-r-une-interview-de-felipe-van-keirsbilck-secretaire-general-de-la-centrale-nationale-des-employes-cne-csc&option=com_content&Itemid=53)

[4] We will not go into the history here of the Christian trade unions, first created with the support of the employers so as to counter the rise of socialist ideas and subsequently structured ideologically on the basis of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, issued in 1891. In the Flemish region, which is its bastion, the CSC (ACV) is organically linked to the bourgeois party CD&V, though the Mouvement ouvrier chrétien (ACW) of which it is one of the main components. In the Francophone part of the country, the MOC has organised relations with social democrats, the Greens and the social Christian party Cdh

[5] A Green deputy in the Walloon parliament, Bernard Wesphael left the ECOLO party in March 2012 after it had refused to make him president. He founded the Mouvement de gauche, to which the French Parti de gauche has given its support on several occasions. The programme of the MG is (timidly) anti-neoliberal, but to the right of the Greens on questions like the veil, law and order and so on

[6]

[http://www.lcr-lagauche.be/cm/index.php?view=article&id=2809:interview-dantonio-cocciolo-president-de-la-federation-hainaut-namur-des-metallistes-mwb-fgtb-la-fgtb-a-besoin-dun-nouveau-relais-politique-&option=com\\_content&Itemid=53](http://www.lcr-lagauche.be/cm/index.php?view=article&id=2809:interview-dantonio-cocciolo-president-de-la-federation-hainaut-namur-des-metallistes-mwb-fgtb-la-fgtb-a-besoin-dun-nouveau-relais-politique-&option=com_content&Itemid=53)

[7] A "gouvernement de legislature" cannot be overthrown by the Chamber unless the latter votes for "a motion of constructive censure" designating an alternative government

[8]

[http://www.lcr-lagauche.be/cm/index.php?view=article&id=2658:lvivement-un-grand-parti-de-gauche-r-une-interview-de-felipe-van-keirsbilck-secretaire-general-de-la-centrale-nationale-des-employes-cne-csc&option=com\\_content&Itemid=53](http://www.lcr-lagauche.be/cm/index.php?view=article&id=2658:lvivement-un-grand-parti-de-gauche-r-une-interview-de-felipe-van-keirsbilck-secretaire-general-de-la-centrale-nationale-des-employes-cne-csc&option=com_content&Itemid=53) and  
<http://www.lalibre.be/actu/belgique/un-nouveau-parti-de-gauche-doit-emerger-51b8f447e4b0de6db9c8993d>