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Belgium: What now?

# Perspectives for the LCR, the PTB and the trade union left

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**On May 25, two candidates for the Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB – Workers’ Party of Belgium) entered the Chamber, two in the Walloon parliament and four in the Brussels Parliament, elected on the lists of the PTB-GO (Gauche d’Ouverture) in Wallonia, and on a bilingual PTB-PVDA-GO! list in Brussels.**

### **1. How does the LCR see the result of the PTB-GO lists at the elections of May 25, 2014? How does this result compare to those of other elections in the past?**

The eligibility threshold for the Belgian federal parliament is 5% and the constituencies have been enlarged at the provincial level. The thresholds for access to regional parliaments are sometimes higher (except where a particular mechanism allows the technical grouping of lists to circumvent the threshold of 5%). This makes the election of a first parliamentarian more difficult than in other countries and helps explain why Belgium was one of the only European countries without elected representatives of the radical left.

Since the neoliberal turn from the beginning of 1980, in spite of many social struggles against austerity (co-managed by the PS and Ecolo), no list or organization to the left of the PS came near the threshold of eligibility. The results of the left ranged between 0.5% and 2%. At the European elections in 1994, for example, the United Left list (LCR, CP and independents) won 1.7% and the PTB 1%.

We sensed a change at the federal elections of 2010. It was then that the PTB took first place. On the Francophone side, it gained 2.07% of the vote and the Left Front list 1.15% (LCR, PC, PSL and independents). But the qualitative change came two years later. At the local elections of October 2012, the PTB increased its elected representatives at the communal level from 15 to 47, with scores that placed it at the level of the established parties in the major cities and in some working class communes, in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. Therefore, a breakthrough at the central level of parliaments became possible.

This breakthrough occurred on May 25, 2014, when simultaneous elections for the federal parliament, the regional parliaments and the European Parliament took place. Two candidates of the PTB entered the Chamber, two in the Walloon parliament and four in the Brussels Parliament. All were elected on the PTB-GO (Gauche d’Ouverture) lists in Wallonia, and on a bilingual PTB-PVDA-GO! list in Brussels. These lists gathered independent personalities around the PTB, the LCR and the CP. They also benefited from the sympathy and even support of trade union sectors.

On the Flemish side, the PTB decided that there were no partners for an opening of the same type. Its result in Antwerp was excellent (4.52%, more than 8% in the city), but it did not pick up the hoped for election as deputy of its national president, Peter Mertens. Beyond this disappointment, Belgium is no longer an exception in Europe: the radical left has entered the elected assemblies.

### **2. How do you explain the unblocking of electoral opportunities for the radical left?**

The main reason for the blockage lay in the fact that social democracy has long retained a real popular social base. In Flanders, the greater part of this base left social democracy several years ago, but to go to the extreme right and then to the nationalists. The political field is so dominated by the right that the “useful” vote for the Socialists (and especially for the Greens, who are in opposition to all levels) appears as a lesser evil. This situation is reflected in the

Francophone part of the country where the PS (and the Greens) are in the majority and apply neoliberal policies, but present themselves despite everything as the bulwark against the right and against “the Flemish” (“without us it would be worse”). For nearly thirty years, social democracy has thus been able to retain an electoral monopoly on the left, despite the fact that it was conducting in government a right wing policy and some of its leaders were implicated in corruption scandals.

This mechanism started to crack after the protracted political crisis following the federal elections of 2010. At the end of the latter, the president of the PS, Elio Di Rupo, was finally unable to fulfil his ambition of becoming prime minister. The fact that his federal government did not have a majority in Flanders, and was attacked by the liberal nationalists of the NVA (the Neo-Flemish Alliance, which had emerged as the biggest party) led Di Rupo to apply neoliberal policies with a very special zeal. From January 2012 to May 2014, he imposed a “shock therapy” in the hope of allowing the classic Flemish right (Flemish and Christian Democrat: CD&V; Flemish Liberals and Democrats: OpenVLD) and the Sp.a (the PS in Flanders) to regain a majority against the NVA. His calculation was that the PS would thus have every chance of staying in government.

It was working people who paid the bill for politician’s calculation, and it was a high one. The unions were pushed into the corner, wages were frozen for two years, retirement has been made later, Maggie De Block [\[1\]](#) had carte blanche to tighten the screw on asylum seekers, the undocumented and foreigners, the security policy of the SAC was imposed against all. To plug the hole dug by the rescue of the banks under the Leterme government, twenty-two billion Euros in savings have been taxed at swingeing rates, penalising notably the unemployed, recipients of social aid and the public sector.

This policy caused discontent all the more deeply in that it was conducted under the guidance of a PS Prime Minister. This is the first reason for the unblocking of the electoral possibilities for the left, and the most important. During the campaign, on the ground, activists realized that a part of the traditional social base of the PS intended to punish it and express its desire for a social alternative.

The second reason is the general tone of the PTB-GO! (and PVDA+ in Flanders) campaign. The discourse adopted, the arguments made, the concrete demands proposed, the way of expressing oneself before the mass of the people: all this “stuck” fairly well to the current level of radicalisation. The credit goes mainly to the PTB, and not only to its spokesperson. This discourse and tone is the product of the centralization of the experience on the ground of the members of the PTB in the neighbourhoods, workplaces and associations. While in the 1990s activists were disarmed before the neoliberal ideological offensive, the PTB has maintained the idea of building a party to challenge social democracy in its own popular social base, and this perseverance is today rewarded. Whatever the criticisms to be made of the program, ideology and functioning of the PTB, it is a lesson for the entire left.

The third reason is the image of unity created on the Francophone side by the “Gauche d’Ouverture” (the LCR, the CP, the personalities) and its major trade union support. From 1970 until recently, the entire Belgian left had been contaminated more or less by the blatant sectarianism of the PTB, which is its main component. Thanks to the “GO”, left voters had the feeling that the old quarrels were in the process of being overcome, so that a vote for the PTB-GO lists would allow them to simply express their sympathy with the slogans, values and principles fundamental to the whole (true) left such as social justice, fiscal justice and solidarity. Despite its shortcomings or imperfections, PTB-GO was the only response to the appeal launched on 1 May 2012 by the FGTB of Charleroi-Sud-Hainaut [\[2\]](#), which called for anti-capitalist unity in order to present a political alternative to the PS. That is why the other lists on the left presented in these elections have been completely marginalized [\[3\]](#).

### **3. Was the success due primarily to this unity?**

No, all three elements of explanation have played a part and the first two are decisive. But it is indisputable that the

polls took off immediately after the press conference of presentation of the GO, at the end of January. The impact of this press conference was very important. The members of the Standing Committee of the FGTB in Charleroi were present, not to support the PTB (as the press has said), but to welcome a first step being taken in the direction of their appeal of May 1, 2012. This intervention by Daniel Piron and his comrades has had an enormous weight, not only in the media but also, and above all, at the base, in the workplaces.

Given the score attained in the province of Liege, it is very likely that Raoul Hedebouw would have been elected even on a PTB+ list, without the support of the GO. But it is certain that, without the dynamic of the GO, he would not have been joined by Marco van Hees. The PTB-GO! list for the Chamber in Hainaut did not get beyond the eligibility threshold of around 1,300 votes. However, the two candidates of the LCR brought 2,500 votes to the list, and that of the CP nearly a thousand more. Above all, it is in this province that the trade union left was most explicitly involved, and it has done so because there was an opening.

Two weeks before the vote, the 150 members of the committee of MWB Hainaut-Namur (FGTB metalworkers) voted for a resolution which ended in these words: "The left in power... has decomposed and is diluted in the right... After a legislature marked by austerity and the dismantling of social rights, it is time to begin a 180 degree turn to the left: the real anti-capitalist left brings hope for the world of work". This text was disseminated by many workplace delegations (this is one of the causes of the surprising score for the PTB-GO lists in the province of Namur: 4.86 per cent!). In western Hainaut, FGTB metalworkers openly supported the PTB-GO campaign, particularly by organizing on April 25 a public debate with Marco van Hees and Raoul Hedebouw (PTB), Freddy Mathieu (LCR) and Francois d'Agostino (CP). A less visible but real support was provided by other trade unionists, including CNE [\[4\]](#) activists who organized with the FGTB of Charleroi the meeting for an anti-capitalist alternative to the Géode, in March 2013.

**4. The PTB was originally a Mao-Stalinist organization which was very sectarian, fiercely anti-Trotskyist and led in an authoritarian manner. Now it has become a genuine small political party with a few thousand members. But is it in a position to follow the evolution of the SP in the Netherlands, which is no longer anti-capitalist and participates in coalitions with the Liberal party? On the other hand, has GO allowed the PTB to de-demonise itself without explicitly breaking with its past?**

The past of the PTB is indeed marked by some frightening positions: mobilization against "Soviet social-imperialism, main enemy of the peoples"; the denunciation of Cuba as a "fifth column" of this "imperialism"; support for the crimes of Stalin, the Khmer Rouge, Karadzic, Kim Il Sung and so on without counting the impressive number of zigzags on the attitude to trade unions: originating outside of the workers' movement, the PTB was originally violently anti-union.

But the PTB comes from Mao-Stalinism, which is not quite the same thing as Stalinism itself. The Maoist reference explains in particular the commitment of the PTB to work on the ground among the popular classes (through medical centres where patients are treated at the rate reimbursed by health insurance) and its ability to carry out investigations to "rectify" its errors.

In the early 2000s, noting that it had not actually penetrated electorally in spite of the success of its campaigns and its "people's doctors" notably, the PTB leadership conducted an investigation which led it to rectify its image to make it less partisan and less "extremist". At the same time, the general secretary inspired an attempt to break through with lists controlled by the PTB but expanded and which no longer bore the acronym of the party. In the 2003 elections, a "Resist" list was thus formed in alliance with the European Arab League. As this was a major defeat, an acute conflict broke out between the secretary general and the president-founder, Ludo Martens. The first was dismissed, but the second fell seriously ill, and then died.

The party cadres then developed a new orientation. Adopted in 2008, it was in large part created by a new generation, of which several figures are the children of historical PTB cadres. The key elements are the maintenance

of a non-sectarian and non-extremist image, focused on very concrete immediate demands, a major effort of communication to give the PTB a profile as such in the media (the episode of the “Resist” list being closed), a “unitary” practice in the social movements, the absence of any public criticism of the big organizations (including the union bureaucracies) and great caution in propaganda on the ground concerning “difficult” questions (racism, immigration, the undocumented, homosexuality and so on) - which does not mean that the PTB is silent on these issues or is absent from mobilisations.

This transformation has enabled the PTB to recruit members and activists more and more widely, which has strengthened the mass campaigns (for the reduction of VAT on energy, for example). The latter are supported in their work by an effective research office, the attention of the major media has been drawn, and the political breakthrough is now underway.

During the campaign, some have criticized the LCR for “capitulating to the PTB” and participating in a “post-Stalinist adventure”. Rather than campaigning with the PTB, we have been urged to build something like the Greek Syriza or the Portuguese Left Bloc. However, Syriza is a creation of the Synaspismos Party, the Eurocommunist and rightist wing of the Greek Communist Party: this movement is therefore born from a “post-Stalinist adventure”. With regard to the Left Bloc, its main component at its creation was the Maoist UDP party, sister party of the PTB at the time... Incidentally, most of the organizations that come from Stalinism or Mao-Stalinism have never made a thorough balance sheet of Stalinism, the conditions of its victory and what should have been done to fight it. That has not prevented them evolving in such a way that collaboration becomes possible and even necessary.

In reality, many of those who have denounced the LCR were those who thought that no left deputy was better than PTB deputies. Some tried to push the PTB away from the dynamic opened by the appeal of the Charleroi FGTB, and even to exploit this appeal so that it would serve only to regroup “anti-Stalinists” and to strengthen them against the PTB. The LCR has fought these ideas and attempts. We thought, on the contrary, that the new PTB had a key role to play in the dynamic, and that its participation was decisive so that the appeal of the trade unionists of Charleroi led to the election of parliamentarians to the left of the PS and Ecolo.

This does not eliminate our disagreements with the PTB or the questions we are asking on its break with its Mao-Stalinist past. But conjunctures change, organizations evolve. Politics is not a game of timeless copy-paste but a concrete activity based on the analysis of concrete situations in their possible evolution. There are times when it is necessary to apply the maxim of Napoleon: *on s'engage et puis on voit*. Therefore, without forgetting the past, we have decided to judge the PTB on what it says and does today.

With respect to the future, it seems clear that the PTB is inspired by the experience of its former sister party, the Dutch SP. But it is too early to say that it will evolve quite in the same direction as the latter. The Belgian context is very different, in particular because of the specific weight of the trade union movement in general, and of the socialist trade union movement in particular. Other possibilities seem open, some of which might be more interesting to the left. On the international scene - in Greece, Portugal, the Philippines, for example - the trajectories of other organizations of the Mao-Stalinist movement show a great diversity.

### **5. Now that the LCR no longer judges the PTB on its ideological origin, how does it see the strengths and weaknesses of the current PTB, including its internal regime?**

The answer follows from what has been said above. The strong points: the desire to build a party, several thousand members, a few hundred dedicated cadres, immediate concrete demands, a research office producing quality analysis, an often remarkable work on the ground (in neighbourhoods, workplaces), effective communication, good spokespersons, a real investment in the social movements, a true effort to grasp the environmental issue, a discourse which seeks unity around the values of the left ... on several of these points, we have much to learn.

The weak points: the relative muting of the socialist discourse, the under-estimation of anti-capitalist demands to provide a bridge between immediate objectives and social transformation (the 32 hour week did not appear in the electoral program of the PTB, nor the nationalization of the entire financial sector), the over-timid character of some immediate demands (1,000 Euros per month minimum is insufficient to combat poverty) and tailism in relation to the union bureaucracies. This last point is key: the PTB does not seem to see that there is a struggle between left and right in the unions. In any case, it is as if this battle did not exist, as if the PTB was the political expression of the entire labour movement. To us, this is an error.

Another crucial point is that the PTB does not seem to really measure the importance of feminists and LGBT struggles. This under-estimation was clearly reflected in the campaign, particularly in the composition of the lists. The issue is located at several levels. At the level of struggles and programs, because women are first in line as victims of austerity. At the level of forms of action, because the self-organization of women is needed to combat specific oppression. At the ideological level, because social regression is always matched with the restoration of reactionary values. At the level of project of society, finally, because the struggle against patriarchal oppression will have to continue in a non-capitalist society. You can see that the PTB is reticent on all these issues that it seems to perceive as factors of division. And in fact, the struggles of women (like those of the LGBT community, but also those of oppressed nationalities) challenge the monolithic vision of the class struggle, therefore, also the monolithic vision of the party, which are two characteristics of Stalinism.

In addition, we should not forget the international issues. They did not really arise during the campaign but of course they are of a very high importance. Although it has broken with North Korea, the PTB remains strongly marked by a vision of the world in black and white, which is to estimate that the enemies of our enemies are necessarily, if not our friends, at least our allies. In the LCR, we believe that this simplistic view does not allow us to orient correctly. We are fighting in priority against our own imperialism, but without automatically choosing to support the opposite “camp”. Our camp is that of the exploited and oppressed. We believe that the evolution of the international situation justifies this. We have seen it in Ukraine, in Syria and in Iraq, for example. The fact that the USA is bombing Islamic State does not mean that the left should be in the “camp” of Islamic State, which is a criminal organization.

As regards the internal regime of the PTB, we do not want to interfere with it. We find that the PTB is no longer a monolithic organization and that the atmosphere in its public activities is open and friendly. There seems to be a great freedom of discussion, and even of action. But these positive elements are not necessarily incompatible with partitioning and verticalism.

### **6. Has the campaign of the FGTB in Charleroi for a political alternative to the left of the PS played a role in bringing the PTB to accept cooperation with two much smaller organizations like the CP and the LCR/SAP?**

On May 1, 2012, the FGTB of Charleroi (102,000 members) denounced the neoliberal policy of social democracy and called for unity in order to build an anti-capitalist political alternative, to the left of the PS and the Greens. This is a historic event, unprecedented in the history of our labour movement. This is not the first time that a trade union sector in Belgium has broken with the PS, but it is the first time that leaders have emerged from “pure trade unionism” to act on the political terrain in the interest of their members, while maintaining their trade union independence.

The position of Charleroi is interesting because it reverses the roles between the social and the political, between the social movements and political parties. Inasmuch as it is accompanied by a struggle for broader union democracy - and this is the case at Charleroi - this concept seems to us emancipating (in the sense that Marx said that “the emancipation of the workers will be the work of the workers themselves”).

It is important to emphasize that the FGTB of Charleroi has not contented itself with a “slanging match”. Its executive bodies have discussed and adopted two programmatic documents which have been printed in pamphlets of ten

thousand copies. One of these pamphlets is a pedagogical explanation of the reasons why the union should act openly on the political terrain, without giving up its independence in relation to the parties (this strategy is explicitly opposed to that of reliance on “political friends”). The other is an anti-capitalist emergency programme with ten objectives.

On the basis of these two documents, the FGTB of Charleroi organized, in collaboration with the CNE, an open assembly which brought together 400 activists of all backgrounds. In addition, it has convened all the political organizations which support its initiative to meet in a support committee, which it has chaired and whose work it has facilitated.

Not only the PTB, but all the organizations on the left have had to face their responsibilities. The trade union movement has a considerable weight in our country, so that the appeal of the FGTB of Charleroi has aroused hope and enthusiasm everywhere. And those who were there on May 1, 2012 have had the impression that a breach was opened finally in the control that social democracy exercises on trade unionism. It was an insult to believe, as some did, that they could go into the elections as if it were nothing, by ignoring the FGTB of Charleroi, or wanting to dictate themselves the conditions of unity.

Rather than speculating on the internal debates raised within the PTB by the initiative of the trade unionists, we prefer to focus on our balance sheet as the LCR:

A) We have found that this call was totally in the direction of our “open letter to trades unionists” made public three months earlier;

(B) We have immediately supported and with all our forces the call of the trade unionists from Charleroi;

C) We considered that the PTB was unavoidable in beginning to make concrete progress in the direction of this appeal;

D) The relationship of forces has led us to conclude to the need for a gathering around the PTB, in which this party would necessarily play a decisive role. The PTB being what it is, we have therefore excluded any idea of an alternate list, but also any idea of a cartel with the PTB or a unitary list under a specific name. It is thus that we have actively collaborated to develop what would become “PTB-GO”.

In practice, this “sui generis” kind of gathering has not always been comfortable for the LCR. The PTB has for example imposed a maximum number of LCR and CP candidates per list and has alone decided on their place. However, things basically went well. Above all, the essential thing in our eyes was to ensure that the appeal of May 1, 2012 found at least a beginning of realization, in order that the trade union left would be reinforced by the test. Social democracy speculated on a failure, the trade union right also. It is of crucial strategic importance that these forces have been beaten and the LCR has taken its responsibilities for this.

### **7. The LCR/SAP, while working for the PTB/Go, had within the alliance the right to circulate its own material, to put its own accents in the election campaign. What was the profile and the specific contribution of the LCR/SAP in the common election campaign?**

In fact, there was very little common campaigning. In particular, there was not a common platform. The only common document was the appeal “A rendezvous not to be missed”, launched by the support committee for the PTB-GO lists. The program that the PTB drew up under the PTB-GO rubric did not commit the independents, the LCR, or the CP. This situation was in part the result of the lack of time, partly the result of the fact that the PTB is considered as sole leader of the GO. That is the other side of the coin.

The other aspect is that we have had full freedom to carry out our own campaign on our own program, with our own material and calling for a vote for our own candidates. We did this in the two parts of the country, including in Flanders where, although there was no "GO", we have nevertheless presented candidates on the lists of the PTB (PVDA in Flemish).

Our profile has been more radical than that of the PTB: anti-capitalist, feminist, eco-socialist and internationalist. We have notably defended the 32 hours without loss of pay, the nationalization without compensation of the banking and energy sectors, defended a consistent feminist program and so on. We have not acted in a spirit of one-upmanship, but because this radical program is objectively necessary to meet the challenges of the period. This is also what the FGTB of Charleroi, whose "10 objectives" we explicitly supported, said.

The strong point of our campaign was our meeting in Brussels, with Olivier Besancenot (NPA), Aurelie Decoene (head of the PTB European list), several personalities from "GO" and a series of our candidates.

It should be noted that not all of the inputs of the LCR have been visible: we have played a discreet but considerable role so that the "GO" was possible, bringing personalities and trade unionists to support this initiative.

**8. What is your assessment of the election campaign and of the cooperation within the PTB-GO? Have you been able to strengthen your public presence and media coverage, multiply your contacts, forge bonds of comradeship with activists of the PTB and the PCB, win new members?**

In three months of campaigning, the LCR has been more present in the media than in the previous ten years. The balance sheet from this point of view is very positive.

We have established links of comradeship with members of the PTB, and even with the leaders of that organization. But we do not aim to go fishing for members in the ranks of the PTB, or to carry out "entryism" in this organization. If members of the PTB want to come to us, they are welcome, but on the basis of agreement with our program and our strategy. Being dissatisfied with this or that aspect of the operation of the PTB is not a sufficient reason.

On the left in general, as has already been said, our decision to opt for unity around the PTB has not been unanimously appreciated. Some have remained very sceptical, others were downright hostile. But a lot of left activists have agreed with our approach. Speaking on our site, a trade union leader thanked us for offering him an opportunity to vote at a time according to both his heart and his mind. His comment summed up the state of mind of many people who have not made the step of being active with the LCR in this campaign.

Given the possibility of electing deputies, the campaign went beyond the sphere of pure propaganda. Thanks to its presence in PTB-GO, the LCR has participated in a social combat and concrete politics. We have oriented in our own way, that is to say starting from our line (the need for a new class party) and from our analysis (on the major importance of the fight between left and right in the unions and the engagement of the union left in the political arena). This is one of our characteristics.

A few people who didn't know us have made contact with us on the basis of our propaganda material. By contrast, dozens of people who knew us have fought this battle with us and want to continue to carry it out. This opens up possibilities for strengthening, some of which are already being implemented in new memberships.

The most important element of our balance sheet concerns our links with the trade union left. During the campaign, we have confirmed the status of the LCR as an organization that takes its responsibilities in the interest of enhancing



this left, because it is in the last instance in the interest of all workers, all the oppressed. The fact that we have maintained this approach, even in an election period, is much appreciated. Relations of trust and collaboration have been strengthened. This is not necessarily measured in numbers of members, but it is decisive for the future.

### **9. Will the cooperation with the PTB continue at the level of extra-parliamentary work, mobilizations, public rallies, joint debates?**

We argue in this direction, and the personalities of "GO" also. The PTB does not seem really opposed, but places a strong emphasis on its own construction as well as on the broadest social front in the fight against austerity. We are of course for this broad social front, but it must, at the same time, continue the fight for an anti-capitalist political alternative, in the sense of the Charleroi appeal. For this, there is a need to consolidate GO along with the PTB, to show together that we want to continue. Some fear that the PTB seeks to drown the fish, to close the door on unity because it considers that its deputies, and the financial results of the electoral victory, belong only to them. We will see more clearly in a few weeks or months.

It is very important that everyone carefully analyzes the new political situation. It is likely that a federal government of the homogeneous right will be set up. Social democracy will attempt to restore its reputation in opposition, by focusing on the fact that a part of the voters who have left will return to the fold of the "lesser evil", which could lead to the defeat of the PTB-GO deputies. In the north of the country, social democracy is absent from all levels of power, the Greens also. It is clear to us that this situation reinforces the need to continue in the path of unity on the Francophone side, and encourage them to open a debate on the possibility of unity on the Flemish side also. This is moreover what the left trade unionists want: throughout the campaign, their representatives have stated that they did not support the PTB, PTB-GO was a first step in the direction of their appeal, and that there should be others subsequently.

### **10. What perspective opens for the next steps on the path to the construction of a party with a mass vocation to challenge social democracy from its left and create a political instrument capable of defending the interests of employees and all the oppressed?**

The steps forward in this direction mainly depend on the development of the trade union left, of its capacity - or not - to involve other social movements and the ability - or not - of left political organizations and independent intellectuals to promote this development and to interact with it.

There are several aspects to the question. A geographical aspect first: the Charleroi appeal has received too little support in other regions, and nothing similar has happened in the trade union movement in Flanders. Then an inter-union aspect: at the beginning, the most lucid leader of the FGTB in Charleroi had promoted contacts and collaboration with the Christian trade unionists of the CSC, including those of the Centrale nationale des employés. Also, they clearly showed their willingness to develop a project for the whole of the working class. Unfortunately, they have had to back down before the sectarian prejudices and the apparatus logic of some of their own colleagues. These two dimensions - geographical and inter-union - are related, especially in Flanders where the Christian union is in the majority and organically linked to the Social Christian Party (CD&V), so that the question of political extension is posed very specifically.

But the most important development concerns the involvement of the trade union rank and file. The appeal of the FGTB in Charleroi has been launched by the bodies of the union. It has been the basis of many discussions in trade union meetings, where the need for a political alternative was felt, and the two pamphlets have been discussed in forums with many workplace delegates. However, the battle has been supported mainly by the secretaries. Among these, some fell back with the approach of the elections, without that this necessarily being at the request of their members and delegates. In a more general way, the pressure of the right wing union bureaucracy is very strong.

These difficulties can be overcome only if the base is organized to grasp the strategic question, link it to its struggles, and to ensure that the debate is taking place at all levels and in all professional federations. The question “How to broaden the political breach opened on 25 May?” (You might even say: “How can we prevent the PS closing it?”) is reduced in the end to another one: “How to expand the trade union left?”

The entire left is involved. In particular the PTB, whose responsibility is proportional to its strength. What will be its orientation? On the one hand, it has many combative trade unionists, which places it in a position to play a leadership role. On the other hand, it presents itself systematically as the political relay of the trade unions in general and has avoided any public criticism of the apparatuses (even when bureaucratic repression has struck its own members) which risks putting it on a slippery slope that others have taken before it and which leads to social democracy. An active involvement of the trade union rank and file will be the best way of encouraging it to make the right choice, which would be in the interests of the entire anti-capitalist, social and political left.

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[1] Secretary for asylum, immigration and social integration in the Di Rupo government

[2] The Fédération générale du travail de Belgique (FGTB) is a union of social democratic origin. It currently has 1.5 million members. The regional centre of Charleroi & South Hainaut is the second biggest of the Walloon FGTB in number of affiliates

[3] The Mouvement de Gauche (MG), founded in 2012 by individuals from the Greens and the PS, won 0.07% of the vote; the Movement Vega, founded by the former Ecolo deputy Vincent Decroly in 2013, won 0.23% of the vote in the European elections (Francophone college), 1.02% in the region of Liege and 0.51% in the region of Brussels; the “Gauches Communes” front of the Parti socialiste de lutte (PSL) and the Parti humaniste (PH) got 0.02% of the vote and 0.21% in the region of Brussels

[4] The Centrale nationale des employés (CNE) is the most important union federation in Francophone and is affiliated to the Confédération des syndicats chrétiens (CSC), the most important confederation in Belgium (1.7 million members). During its last congress the CNE amended its statutes, removing the references to papal encyclicals