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Belgium

Eight questions on trade union independence and politics

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The Charleroi & Sud-Hainaut regional organization is the second biggest of the FGTB in membership terms (102,000). It has just printed ten thousand copies of a pamphlet whose key passages we reproduce here.

1. Can trade unions get involved in politics?

Yes. They not only can, they must. Our FGTB defends a project of a classless society. Defined in broad outline in our Statement of Principles, this project is incompatible with capitalism. Its realization implies the abolition of this system and its replacement by another, socialist and democratic. It is in this perspective that the Statement of Principles demands collective ownership of the major means of production, that our congresses of 1954 and 1956 defended the need for "anti-capitalist structural reforms" (nationalization of credit and energy, notably) and that our Walloon Inter-regional denounces the capitalism which "seriously damages health". Indeed, our anti-capitalist demands can only be imposed by the direct action of the workers organized in their unions. They also require that this trade union action is extended by a political action, at all levels of power. As a trade union, we are a counter power independent of any political party and we will always remain so, even in a non-capitalist society. But we are more than a counter power: in the name of our ultimate objective of a society without class, we fight against the power of the capitalists and for the power of the workers. In this sense, we should be involved in politics.

2. Does that mean our political role is that of prodding the existing parties?

No, this strategy of prodding has led us into a dead end. Since 1975, we have tried to influence those who hold the levers of power. In particular, we rely on those who say they are our "political friends" in Parliament and in government, the social democrats and Greens. Without results. The situation of labour has only got worse. The social benefits and the public sector conquered by the struggles of our parents and grandparents are dismantled, trade union freedoms are attacked. Our "political friends" claim that they still agree with us but are obliged to compromise with the right in government, that "without them it would be worse". We no longer believe it. We do not consider them as parties of the right but we note:

â€" that they are converts to the neoliberal dogmas of competitiveness and privatization;

â€" that they are no longer an alternative to capitalist society, that they are content to manage it while advocating some marginal "mini-measures";

â€" that they have lost their roots and that there is no left wing within them.

These parties have collaborated and continue to collaborate in the construction of a capitalist Europe, which is a machine of war against the world of labour. From the Plan Global to the Di Rupo measures via the Pacte des Générations, they deliberately force down the pill of austerity, against trade union résistance. The "transmission belt" is running the wrong way. They are no longer relays which can be reactive for our project of society. On the contrary: the examples of Greece, Great Britain, Portugal, Italy and Spain show that their managerial policy plays the game of the right and the far right. In these countries, this right has profited from this to form governments which are still more aggressive against the workers. In these conditions, the strategy of the prod is a deadly trap; We should urgently get out of it.

3. So we need a new political strategy? Which?

Yes, we need a new political strategy because without political relays we are condemned to permanent retreat. At best, we “limit the damage” but over the long term all our conquests are destroyed. Massive unemployment, increasing precarity of work, the carving up of employment, the internationalisation of capital and the despotic role of the European Union means that the relationship of forces in the enterprises is increasingly unfavourable to workers. To deal with this, we obviously need in the first place a more combative and democratic trades unionism:

“ which gives us the means of action to change the relationship of forces;

“ which dares to pose anti-capitalist demands;

“ and which radically opposes all forms of exploitation and oppression imposed on all categories of workers, in the workplaces and in society in general.

But that is not enough. Whether it be refusing the payment of the illegitimate debt, fighting layoffs and unemployment, imposing a just and progressive taxation or demanding that public aid to companies is converted into mortgages (as proposed by the FGTB in Liege), we are seriously handicapped by the absence of a political force which helps us to popularise our demands and which upholds them at the regional, federal and European scale. Our Statement of Principles says that “the trade union movement will accept the contribution of the party or parties who will join its action for the realisation of its objectives”. Whereas this contribution of parties is vital today, we note that the PS and Ecolo no longer contribute to our action because they no longer share our objectives. To change the relationship of forces with the employers and the right, we thus need a strong FGTB and a new, anti-capitalist political force, to the left of the PS and Ecolo. To aid the emergence and development of this force so that it becomes the broadest possible, that is the political strategy we propose. That is the meaning of the appeal we launched on May 1, 2012.

4. The appeal of May 1, 2012 means then that the FGTB wants to create a new political party?

No, we don't want to create a party, it isn't our role. We propose that the FGTB actively favours the appearance of a new anti-capitalist force on the political and electoral field. This is not the same thing. We wish to put our weight in the balance to bring together all those who aspire to an anti-capitalist alternative. We put them before their responsibilities to create a force as faithful to the interests of labour as the existing forces are faithful to the interests of the employers. Ultimately, this force could become a party, but it isn't our responsibility. Also, we do not want to congeal things. On the contrary: for us it is about opening a space and unleashing a dynamic. We have formed a support committee with the parties of the radical left because they have responded positively to the Appeal of May 1, 2012. That constitutes a first nucleus. But the process of political regroupment should become broader. That is why we invite left members of the PS and Ecolo to join the dynamic which is established. We also invite left intellectuals and activists in the associations to join our appeal. It is an ambitious project, which will demand patience, audacity and creativity. To a certain extent we are inspired by the action of the working class militants of the 19th century, who, after having founded the first funds of mutual aid and solidarity, created the POB (the ancestor of the PS) because they understood the need for a political tool to strengthen their struggle. But it is obviously necessary to draw the lessons of the manner in which this political tool ended up escaping them.

5. What should be done concretely?

The first thing to do is to break the privileged links with the PS. That is what the FGTB of Charleroi & Sud-Hainaut did some years ago. It is not about denouncing the PS as an enemy, or slandering it, but of understanding that the privileged links between the FGTB and the PS, in the context of Action commune socialiste, prevented us from emerging from the strategy of the prod which leads us into a dead end. At the same time, it should then pronounce itself for an alternative political strategy because pure trades unionism without political relays is not a solution. That is what we have done on May 1, 2012 and we ask all the articulations of the FGTB at the professional and inter-professional levels to debate with us to join in this fight. Finally, we need to draw up the anti-capitalist programme that we, as trades unionists, want to see relayed on the political terrain.

6. Doesn't this strategy endanger our trade union independence?

That is a decisive point where we must be very vigilant. We must remain “the direct emanation of the organised working forces”, “respecting all opinions, both political and philosophical” as our Statement of Principles says. That involves an absolute independence in relation to all political parties. Indeed, what threatens this independence today is not that we are involved in politics, but that we aren't involved in it. The strategy of the prod leads us systematically to put our programme in the back pocket and leads us to de facto accept the neoliberal programme. We organize mobilizations against austerity and, systematically, the strategy of the prod leads us to sacrifice our demands so as not to endanger the policies of the PS and Ecolo, in the name of the “lesser evil”. We arrive at such a point today that some union leaders, in the name of this “lesser evil”, no longer want to even organize the fight against austerity. Faced with this, the alternative strategy that we propose allows recovering a real trade union independence. In the context of our strategy, we will draw up our programme and lead our struggles according to one concern: the needs of the workers. We will encourage them to involve themselves actively and democratically, so that this programme and these struggles are theirs. Thus, we reverse the situation. Thus, we regain strength. Thus, instead of the parties dictating their policies to us, it is us who will demand that the parties fight with us for this programme.

7. So we want to form new political relays for the FGTB?

No, we want to form new political relays for the world of labour as a whole. It is obviously inside our organisation, the FGTB, that we lead the debate. We will not interfere in the functioning of other trade union organizations. But the FGTB is not alone in being faced with the impasse of the political strategy of the prod. The CSC is in the same situation. That is why, basically, our call for another strategy does not only concern the FGTB. The fact that the CNE has wished to associate itself with our line of march is very important. That shows that our strategy, far from being a source of division, can contribute on the contrary to overcoming certain historic divisions in the labour movement. We should be conscious of the opportunity arising thus, and without abandoning our identity, but respecting difference, favour convergence around a common political project. We should see that this possibility of convergence finds its basic origin in the extreme gravity of the threats facing the world of labour. The European dominant class has launched a frontal attack against our social and democratic gains. It can modify it a little at one moment to avoid a social explosion, or an electoral disaster for the established parties. But it has no other road than to continue its work of destruction. More broadly, the capitalist system had nothing to offer but social and ecological destruction for the benefit of a minority of the population. In this context, inevitably, those who look any further than the end of their noses understand that an anti-capitalist programme is the sole alternative possible faced with this situation. We have no claim by ourselves to elaborate it in all its dimensions. We offer a first outline of it, to be completed and enriched with others. But this first outline will contribute to launching the dynamic of regroupment. That is the meaning of our approach.

8. But all this is surely a dangerous utopia when the right and the employers are on the offensive and Belgium is "on the brink of the abyss", which means a serious threat to social security?

On the contrary, to believe that in bending to capitalist logic, hunkering down while awaiting what happens, will help us, is to be especially naive. We have our backs to the wall. We have no other way out but struggle and the international unification of struggles in the perspective of another Europe. As to "saving Belgium", it is often a false pretext to impose social regression. During the long period "without government"», the country continued to function and the government took significant measures: participation in the war in Libya, channelling significant sums to the banks and applying the austerity measures decided on by previous governments. After 540 days of negotiations, prime minister Di Rupo, in the name of the compromise "to save Belgium", included a whole series of demands from the NVA (a party which considers that its economic programme is that of the VOKA" – the Flemish employers), even when this party was in the end not part of the governmental majority! They are reflected since then in all the attacks that we suffer. We have then seen the fear of the vacuum used to impose compromises with the Flemish right, to the great pleasure of the employers.

Here also, we appeal to our trade union independence. Our solidarity is a class solidarity, that of the workers. We know well that any rupture of national solidarity leads to less resources to organise solidarity. Let's take the example of Ford Genk or Arcelormittal in Liege. What do we note? That the regional authorities, responsible for economic policy, did not have the necessary financial resources to oppose the logic of the employers. What does that mean? That even if they want to pursue another policy (which is not obviously the case), the context of the State Reform prevents them from doing so. It is true that a great threat weighs on our Social Security. Its splitting would be a disaster for the world of labour. It must be avoided. But how? By accepting the continuation of the dismantling of social benefits? By supporting the monarchy, the so-called "link of union between Flemish and Walloons"? This choice between plague and cholera is what the Di Rupo government wishes to impose. we reject it and we say to the politicians: "Social Security belongs to the workers; the employers contributions are not "charges" but deferred and collectivised wages; we demand democratic workers' management of Social Security; thus, if your negligence should end in the breakup of the country, the solidarity of the workers will at least be saved".