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Belgium

When the governors no longer know how to govern

- IV Online magazine - 2008 - IV397 - February 2008 -

Publication date: Friday 29 February 2008

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After more than a hundred days of information, formation, exploration and discussions, it seems there is only the shadow of the beginning of a perspective of an orange-blue government in Belgium, or of any other Belgian government for that matter.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/belgium.jpg>] Belgians demonstrate their support for a unified state

The country is going through a political crisis. It is essentially a crisis at the top, a conflict between bourgeois factions on the type of state or state reform that they need to more effectively impose their neoliberal policies on the social majority.

For some, the bourgeoisie wishes to communalise the country still further, strengthening its division by dividing the working class. Divide and rule, in short. But things are not that simple. There is from all the evidence a real conflict inside the dominant class. There still exists inside it a unitarist, pro- Belgian faction, represented in part by the FEB [1], the Belgian employers' organisation) which, with the Royal Palace in the front line, prefers the old state apparatus of Belgium to a separatist adventure. And there is, above all in Flanders, an increasingly strong faction which desires the (partial?) dismantling of the Belgian state allowing it to discard a whole series of social compromises characteristic of the "old Belgium". When the Flemish parties present at the negotiating table [2] now propose to divide the labour market, it is obvious that their explicit intention is to dismantle the labour codes as well as social benefits, a task that seems to them easier to realise in the Flemish socio-economic framework than in the Belgian framework.

Of course the Centre démocrate humaniste, the Mouvement réformateur [3] and the FEB all wish to carry out an aggressive right wing policy, but they prefer to use the state of Belgium as the most adequate instrument to this end. When the foreign minister, Karel De Gucht, says that foreign trade would be better managed anew at the federal level, it is because he believes that it is to the advantage of businesses in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia, in terms of exports. By this proposal, he only seeks to better defend the interests of "Belgian" capital.

"Bizarrely", in the current climate of outbidding, no bourgeois Flemish nationalist favours the splitting of the Belgian army. In fact they are rather in agreement with the pro-Belgian faction that this army should be inserted as strongly as possible at supranational levels, inside imperialist alliances as NATO or the common European defence. To involve the army in supranational alliances constitutes indeed the best guarantee for the weak bourgeoisie of the different regions of Belgium that it will be capable of defending its own interests on the international arena, including on the military level.

A trap

In other words if we allow the bourgeoisie and its political allies to resolve the national question in Belgium, in their fashion any discussion on the reform of the state will essentially constitute a discussion on the aptest way of defending the class interests of this bourgeoisie in order to wage a offensive against the working class. However, there is no unanimity inside this dominant class on these questions today. On the contrary, the bourgeois forces are deeply divided and the current political crisis is nothing other than the illustration of this division.

It is necessary to take account of the situation opened by the legislative elections: For the first time in a long time, the electoral defeat of social democracy allowed the bourgeoisie to form a homogeneous right wing government at the federal level... but it has still not succeeded in doing so!

By their nature, this debate and these conflicts between various sectors of the bourgeoisie constitute a trap for the left. The threat from the right and the nationalist far right have led some on the Flemish left to take a position in this debate. They take up a pro-Belgian position in a defensive fashion, support the Francophone parties which defend the unity of the country faced with Flemish nationalists or go so far as to praise the "Belgian model" as a symbol of diversity and solidarity... However, opposition to the most extreme bourgeois nationalist faction should not imply alignment with the rival unitarist faction.

The Francophone parties which defend the unity of the country today at the negotiating table do not deserve in any way the support of the left because they are, exactly like the Flemish nationalists, in search of the most adequate level to carry out a right wing policy. The Belgian state was and remains still a bourgeois state and quite anti-democratic (the monarchy!), which has in no way been designed to serve the needs of the social majority. As to "federalism bourgeois style" it has been introduced without the people having any voice in the affair, from above, by the dominant class on the basis of its interests alone and according to its conditions alone. The left should not praise and defend this system.

Those who wish to defend the Belgian state with "internationalist" arguments against Flemish nationalists could just as well defend the European Union with the same arguments. To be clear: on the theoretical level, we are absolutely in favour of a Europeanisation and even of a globalisation of mechanisms of solidarity, which obviously necessitates corresponding levels of competence. But to plead for a Europeanisation of competences in the current context comes down quite simply to delegating competences to a level which is still less democratic and still more neoliberal than the Belgian, Walloon or Flemish levels. Genuine internationalists defend the idea of a united and solidarity-based Europe of the peoples, but not the European Union as it is.

Rather than choosing its camp in the treacherous debate inside the rival bourgeois factions, the left should on the contrary develop an independent and autonomous position on the type of state which the social majority of this country really needs and on the manner in which the cohabitation of the different peoples and cultural minorities should be organised.

Unresolved national question

The debate which has led to the current crisis is indeed a trap for the left. The LCR has always recognised the existence in Belgium of two peoples, two societies at unequal levels of development and combined inside the same state. Moreover, the Belgian state was historically a Francophone state, in the service of the interests of an essentially Francophone bourgeoisie. The history of the Flemish in this state has then been a history of oppression and struggle against this oppression.

The fundamental injustices, oppression and discrimination against the Flemish people have been mainly eliminated. But, since the Flemish nationalist movement has been led by the middle class and the socialist movement largely stayed out of the struggle, it is focused on demand and proposals which are legal, formal and administrative, on formal linguistic equality and so on. The material economic basis of the domination of the Francophone bourgeoisie has never been questioned. Flemish demands have thus never been linked to socialist demands.

There have all the same been times when some sectors in the worker's movement of this country have taken the national question seriously and have formulated responses on the basis of their own class viewpoint. The demand for "Federalism and anti-capitalist structural reforms" in the 1950s and 1960s constituted the backbone of a strategy to dismantle the capitalism of Belgian holdings and its oppressor state. This programme found a fairly broad echo inside the workers' movement but was never realised. Instead of anti-capitalist structural reforms the state has been

restructured for neoliberal reforms.

Since this restructuring has been directed against it, the people have obviously never been associated democratically in the realisation of federalism. Which explains the enormous gulf today between the gravity of the crisis experienced in the highest political circles and the calm and passivity which reigns in the population.

Plague or cholera?

The debate which the bourgeois parties are conducting for the moment in the framework of the governmental negotiations has nothing to do with the right of peoples to self-determination. This debate is carried out from the viewpoint of the interests of the bourgeoisie also and those who, on the left, choose to participate will be condemned irrevocably to sinking into a swamp. The debate taking place in the governmental negotiations does not concern the democratic way of resolving the national question in Belgium, it concerns above all questions of big bucks, neoliberal strategy, xenophobic obsessions and racist arguments. The basic questions are hidden in favour of futile discussions on the licence plates of Flemish and Walloon cars. We reject taking part in this debate, we are neither for the Belgian bourgeoisie, nor for the right wing Flemish nationalists. It is necessary to reject the choice between plague and cholera, between pro-Belgian neoliberalism and its regionalist variant.

The trade unions have a heavy responsibility today for their current attitude is limited to the sole defence of what exists, which is constantly put under pressure. Such an attitude will end inevitably in new defeats. We cannot then be content with its strategy limited solely to the defence of national social security for example. Social security should of course be defended tooth and nail because it has been built by the Flemish and Francophone workers and it should remain their common property. But without offensive mobilisation and without entering onto the political terrain, the unions cannot defend it effectively.

A division of Belgium brought about by the bourgeoisie would constitute a serious defeat for the social majority. But a reform of the state as such would not, necessarily. . That depends on its content, what will or should be done with it and above all on who is the driving force. The national question will remain then without real solution as long as it is not resolved democratically by the social majority. The crucial issue is then the politicisation of the workers' movement around these questions with the goal of developing an autonomous position in relation to all factions of the bourgeoisie. And above all to prepare the response to a future government which, whatever the future institutional framework, will devote itself to dismantling the social conquests.

The political crisis currently forms the subject of a debate inside the Belgian section; this article presents one of the viewpoints under discussion.

[1] (Fédération des entreprises de Belgique [Federation of Enterprises of Belgium])

[2] (Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (VLD, formerly PVV), Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V, until recently called the Christelijke Volkspartij, CVP) and Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA, which emerged from the dislocation of the far right Flemish nationalist Volksunie, in 2001))

[3] (the first, formerly the Parti social chrétien (PSC) is a Francophone Christian Democrat party while the second is a Francophone liberal party formed from a coalition of several parties)