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Covid-19 pandemic in Belgium

Bosses order end to lockdown, government obeys

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Having examined the measures taken by the Wilmès government and the National Security Council, *Gauche Anticapitaliste* calls on the popular classes to prevent an end to lockdown causing a further aggravation of the Covid-19 epidemic.

The cart before the horse

The National Security Council decided on an end to lockdown before the realization of the "strict conditions" listed in the experts' report:

- ▶ 51% of intensive care beds are occupied as of 25 April, not 25%;
- ▶ around 10,000 tests are carried out each day, far from the target of 25,000;
- ▶ the 2,000 people required to contact the relatives of those testing positive have not been hired or trained;
- ▶ preventive measures in schools and in the workplace have not been implemented with the workers concerned;
- ▶ mandatory masks in transport, schools and workplaces where physical distance cannot be respected are not available!

The experts' report was categorical: we cannot "envisage the transition to the first phase of an end to lockdown" if these "strict conditions" are not met. The Wilmès government and the National Security Council have ignored this recommendation. Large companies will reopen on 4 May, public transport also, and all businesses will reopen on 11 May. Classes may begin to resume partially in schools on 18 May (15 May in Flanders), and people may be able to see their loved ones on that date. As for culture, we'll see later...

No confidence in this government!

The Prime Minister promises that the "strict conditions" will be met in time. No confidence can be placed in the authorities. Deputy Prime Minister Geens says it is impossible to provide every Belgian with a mask by 4 May. On 16 March, Minister De Backer promised 10,000 tests a day. A month later we are barely there, and nearly 4,000 people have died in nursing and care homes, victims of a state crime that left them, as well as workers, without protection.

The mask affair shows that the government and the "opposition" parties involved in the management of the crisis take workers for fools. A month ago, politicians, with Maggie De Block and Philippe De Backer at the forefront, repeated that "masks are useless for the population" ; today, we recommend them, we even sometimes make them compulsory, and we reopen haberdashery on 4 May so that people can make up for the shortcomings of the state and the "free market" ... And Ms. Wilmès adds cynically that a scarf or a bandana can do the trick! Who are we laughing at?

Profit before health and life

The truth is that this end to lockdown is dictated by the employers. The employers' organisation, the FEB, has since

4 March denounced the "disproportionate measures" of the fight against Covid-19. Ms. Wilmès agreed, saying that "some companies should not have closed". The experts' report was already a compromise between the health logic of scientists and the logic of capital defended by Wunsch and Thijs within the Group of Experts for an Exit Strategy (GEES). This compromise was not yet sufficient for the employers and their political representatives.

The truth is that profit takes precedence over public health, the right of parents to know their children are safe at school while they are working, and the legitimate right of people to undertake social relations while respecting safety conditions. The truth is also that women will be the main victims of this situation, which will increase the burden of care that patriarchy places on their shoulders. The truth is that everyday life will become even more untenable for the poorest, especially the young, racialized and undocumented. This is unacceptable!

Another end to lockdown is possible

"We cannot remain locked down forever", say neoliberal politicians and bosses, as if that was the debate. Meanwhile, we have already seen an 80% increase in deaths in April 2020 compared to April 2019 and the share of the population immunized against Covid-19 is less than 6% (against a necessary minimum of 60%). It is therefore necessary to plan energetic measures so that the "strict conditions" are met before an end to lockdown. Politicians refuse this because it would be necessary to take money from where it is (i.e. in the coffers of the richest companies and individuals), to invest massively in the sectors of care and public services, to suppress useless production and requisition enterprises so as to produce what is necessary.

Custom-made for capitalists, the end to lockdown proposed by Wilmès & co is reckless and dangerous. It does not give the time necessary to judge the impact of each phase. This is likely to lead to a new outbreak of the epidemic, when health care workers, some of whom have died from the virus, are exhausted. Do we want to reproduce the tragedy that took place in nursing and care homes?

Shock strategy

The popular classes are taken hostage by employers' federations like ESSENSCIA (Chemicals) who practice blackmail for work and say in essence: "we can produce masks and all that is necessary, but only if we abolish the environmental protection and health rules" (which do not exist in China). 85% of the companies checked already do not comply with the rules for protection and physical distance.

The employers will use the special powers measures decided by the government (with the support of the opposition, except the PTB) to impose their objectives. Extreme flexibility, sub-statuses, mobility and overtime are on the agenda. The bosses will take advantage of the social fragmentation created by lockdown to bypass unions as much as possible (or transform them into simple transmission belts). This has already started with the abuse of temporary unemployment and the measures of 11 April: up to 220 hours of overtime without overtime wages, successive fixed-term contracts, refugees working in agriculture without regularization, deregulation of student work and so on.

Organize self-defence

The popular classes are in a state of self-defence. This crisis and employer pressures show that without workers, no

wealth is produced. Gauche anticapitaliste calls on workers, the exploited and the oppressed to organize in neighbourhoods, offices, workplaces, schools, and construction sites to actively monitor working conditions. Our lives and our health are at stake. Reject the agenda of the bosses' government

Gauche anticapitaliste defends the following proposals:

- ▶ In the workplace: strict compliance with the Guide to safety in ending lockdown. Two masks per day (minimum), provided by the owner; ditto for gloves, gel and protective clothing. A 15-minute break every two hours to breathe and wash your hands with soap. A work organization that guarantees physical distance, without resorting to night work. The right of withdrawal exists in Belgium. On this basis, workers and their unions can impose collective and individual screening and protection measures before returning to work, at the employer's expense. Collective refusal to work is strike action. It is more than ever the essential weapon of legitimate self-defence for workers.
- ▶ About a third of the economy is currently in lockdown. In Belgium, 41% of employees in the private sector are temporarily unemployed. "One in five companies is forced to fire employees, that's a lot. One in four says they don't know yet", says Hans Maertens, the managing director of Voka (Flemish employers). "There is a huge risk that temporary unemployment will turn into full unemployment. The longer the economic lockdown, the longer the economic damage, I would almost dare to use the word 'massacre'". Dismissals should be prohibited for the duration of the partial economic paralysis. The ending of the control of the unemployed must be final.
- ▶ Let us reject the employers' blackmail that would make us accept irresponsible and dangerous working conditions. Those who are currently forced into temporary unemployment must receive 100% of their salary, the difference being paid by their boss. No social losses when returning to work. We need a union offensive to preserve jobs and to radically oppose any business closings. The reduction of working time to 30 hours per week without loss of salary with compensatory hiring must be put back on the table.
- ▶ In society in general: massive screenings, confinement of those testing positive, tracing and quarantining of contacts (without recourse to technological procedures based on smartphone data); support by public services and social security for quarantined people.
- ▶ Schools are not day-care centres for the children of workers. No reopening of classes before the end of the summer vacation and before the safety guarantees for workers are effective. Special measures are needed during the next school year to reduce the learning gap and to address the explosions in social inequality caused by the effects of the crisis. Teachers should be able to co-decide as much as possible the modalities allowing the schools to function differently and the way of validating the progress of pupils at the end of this school year and the following years. A solid refinancing of education, as well as the end of grade repetition, is essential to guarantee sufficient hiring and means of health protection as well as classes of ten students in the long term.
- ▶ Undocumented migrants (between 100,000 and 150,000 in Belgium), the 15,000 homeless, detainees and all those who currently live without any form of income or support are particularly hit by the crisis. Detainees who have not committed a crime against persons must be pardoned, alternative sentences to imprisonment must be favoured. Empty houses and buildings must be requisitioned to provide shelter for everyone. The closed centres must be dismantled and replaced by humane reception structures. Medical care, test kits, hygiene must also be organized and followed up by regular and free medical consultations for all these people. The regularization of all undocumented migrants and free healthcare for all is a social and health emergency so that everyone has an effective right to healthcare.
- ▶ Due to lockdown, domestic violence has clearly increased. In order to combat this growing violence, provision

must be made for the victims: shelters for women and care for children, psychosocial and financial assistance, and a feminist judicial response.

- ▶ The moratoriums on evictions of tenants and on water and energy bills must be maintained as necessary to guarantee basic needs and fundamental rights.
- ▶ The Corona crisis allows us to debate democratic decision-making: how are scientists used by political parties and a government with special powers? Scientists cannot dilute their positions in the name of "the needs of the economy", that is, those of the capitalists. The whole of society, the world of work first, must be involved in the decision on what is an essential activity and how to respond to the pandemic.
- ▶ Public services, and above all the health sector, must once again play a central role in our society. No question of an end to lockdown without binding commitments to refinance the care sector - which must become 100% public - and public services in general which must be extended in particular to the pharmaceutical sector, cleaning, nursing homes and home care. The refinancing of public services and Social Security must be guaranteed by a 10% crisis tax on the wealthy, the abolition of the tax shift and other reductions in employers' contributions to Social Security, as well as the suspension for audit of the public debt with a view to its cancellation.
- ▶ Priority must be given to the local production of protective equipment and other medical equipment necessary for the next pandemics, by requisitioning the companies concerned. The production and distribution of medicines under the control of health professionals (doctors, pharmacists, care and nursing homes and so on) must ensure that the country has enough medicines and protective equipment for all.
- ▶ In agriculture and horticulture, local producers must also receive support for the conversion of their holdings to a green and diversified agriculture. Support is also needed for all local short-term production and distribution chains, directly to the consumer.

No to "normality", yes to the alternative!

After this crisis, we do not want to return to capitalist "normality", because this normality was the problem. A broad public debate on priorities is necessary. The economy can no longer serve profit but must serve social needs and the well-being of the population. All injustices must be fought. This means massive refinancing for the health sector, for education, for high quality and free public transport and so on. Scientific research should no longer be dictated by the pharmaceutical industry but by real social needs. Society must operate in a transparent and fair manner. For a radical democracy, from below, by workers and against the special powers of a minority government. Against the systematic police repression which attacks the most precarious, racialized people, young people in working-class neighbourhoods: no structural racism.

The end to lockdown decided by Wilmès and her accomplices is an offensive to further deepen her class policy, racist, sexist, colonial, destructive of the planet. It is in the basic struggle against this offensive that the popular classes can create the conditions for an alternative society, which takes care of humans and non-humans: an eco-social alternative. Self-organization of citizens, a trades unionism based on struggle, critical scientists and a strong social movement are essential to achieve this. These are the lessons we must learn from this crisis, which has shown that radical decisions can be taken in a very short time. It's up to us to impose other choices on society.

Hope is allowed, let's get organized and together we will get there!

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from "[Déconfinement : les patrons ordonnent, le gouvernement exécute](#)".

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