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Belgium

The advances of the climate movement and the obstacles to overcome - part 1

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The climate movement that has been shaking Belgium since the winter has had a big effect on popular consciousness. After months of mobilization, we propose here an initial progress report as well as elements of a response to the strategic questions for the future of the movement.

The climate movement is extremely diverse in Belgium. The new phase we entered started in September 2018 with several rallies organized by Rise For Climate around the European Parliament.

Last winter the desire was to have the biggest event for the climate in the history of the country, at the beginning of the international COP24 summit in Katowice. The gamble was successful since this mobilization brought together more than 70,000 people. In the same period, the young Swede Greta Thunberg made an international call to follow her example and to launch high school student strikes everywhere.

This action, which has had an international impact, has spread to several countries (mostly “rich” countries). The first spontaneous gatherings took place here last December also with hundreds of pupils from several Brussels schools who gathered several times in Brussels and in front of the European Commission.

On Thursday, January 10, following the call of Anuna De Wever and Kyra Gantois on Facebook, 3,000 mainly Flemish-speaking students launched massive climate strikes in Belgium. The movement, which its leadership calls Youth For Climate, expanded from the second week to the Francophone part of the country.

For 13 weeks young people have marched every Thursday for the climate. A movement of tenacity and historical magnitude. In the third week, more than 40,000 young people marched in Brussels. Support groups have also been organized in the Students for Climate and Workers For Climate movements, although they are not yet on a mass scale. Hundreds of scientists are calling for support.

Flemish Environment Minister Joke Schauvliege (a Christian Democrat) was forced to resign after spreading conspiracy theory lies about the nature of the movement. At the same time, the citizen’s collective Rise For Climate, joined by highly institutionalized sectors (for example: the Climate Coalition) and by young people, managed to gather more than 90,000 people on the streets of Brussels on 27 January. Among youth, on the Francophone side, a new collective has been created, “Generation Climate”, with a more radical and combative vision of the climate fight.

As for the ministries of education, the politicians realized that it was less risky to try to support or even co-opt the movement, rather than play the card of direct repression. Thus, in many schools, each class will be allowed in a rotating way to participate in the events, under the supervision of teachers in a pedagogical project, to reduce both the number of strikers and their fighting spirit. by bringing the movement back into the clutches of the school system.

On March 15, 2019 another 45,000 people marched through the streets of Belgium in response to the international call for a climate strike. On this occasion, several union sectors from the FGTB and the CSC called on their activists to mobilize. Work stoppages took place, and two visible blocs from both unions accompanied the young people.

We are of course far from a wave of strikes from below, but it is an important step that has been taken in the juncture between youth and the trade union movement. This action was followed in 112 countries with more than 1.5 million strikers worldwide. A first international historic climate strike, which was followed by a call for a new international

strike on May 24th.

The movement crystallized around the demand for a “Climate Law”, prepared by experts, which aimed to set up a series of objectives, methods and general safeguards to guide all government policies with regard to the climate issue. This law was insufficient as we have set out elsewhere [1], but it determined the tempo of the mobilizations and the urgency, to make it pass before the period of relative government inaction before and after the forthcoming elections.

In addition to mass demonstrations, a more radical and “activist” pole has emerged around Act For Climate Justice (AFCJ), “a call for direct action and civil disobedience by a range of climate groups and activists.” AFCJ was notably behind the blockade of BNP Paribas Fortis on March 18, to protest against the investment of banks in fossil fuels and also participated in organizing the action of occupation of the Rue de la Loi (which ended at the Place du TrÃne) to put pressure on the government to pass the Climate Law.

In recent weeks, predictably enough, the Thursday protests continued with a steady decline in the number of youth mobilized. On March 31, Rise for Climate called for new events. There were 8,000 in the streets of Brussels and 7,000 in Liège. About 200 *gilets jaunes* from Belgium, France and the Netherlands participated in the event to link climate struggles with those for social justice. Within their cortege there was a small black bloc. Finally, on Thursday, April 4, the last of the Thursday events attracted only 500 people in Brussels (but also 700 students in Hainaut). Other dates are scheduled up to May 24, two days before the elections. [2]

Following all these mobilizations, we cannot speak of a spectacular victory and it is legitimate to have a taste of dissatisfaction, but the lines have moved. The balance of the movement is overall a positive one.

While the right-wing N-VA (New Flemish Alliance) hoped that the central themes of the May election campaign would be rooted in anti-migrant racism, security and the community, this massive youth movement, starting from Flanders, managed to ensure that the central theme of this campaign: the climate became central instead. The Flemish far right movement, Schild en Vrienden, which held its brown march in Brussels on December 16th has for the moment, lost its momentum. Worse, Dries Van Langenhove, its spokesperson, was physically expelled from the climate demonstrations.

The movement, it has been said, has shown exemplary tenacity over more than four months of mass mobilization. It has manifested itself in many forms and through many different tactics, it has sparked thousands of discussions about the likely climate disaster. A whole generation of young people have had their first social and political experience much earlier than many previous generations, with disobedience to school and parental authority, school strikes, slogans, reappropriation of political themes, events and so on.

In a very short time, these young people will enter higher education and/or the job market. Whatever happens next, they will have learned to question the authority and routine of the established order.

The big parties, as well as the trade unions, have been surprised and overwhelmed by this youth movement: from the contemptuous N-VA advocating a so-called “eco-realism” that is neither ecological nor realistic, to the resignation of minister Schauvliege and the MR (a liberal Francophone party) who have changed their line four times on this subject, via the two union federations who have oscillated between enthusiastic support (e.g. the CNE, the LBC and the FGTB) and shrugging of shoulders (by the teaching federations!) in relation to the March 15th strike.

The historic climate strike itself followed a historic women's strike in the country. In both cases, even if the number of employees on strike is not yet high, there are precedents, important guidelines which are based from the outset on

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the question of the historical role of the workers' movement in response to the fight against oppression and the fight against the destruction of our only place of life, the Earth.

More generally, the climate movement, driven by youth, has lifted the country out of its endless sluggishness and the demoralization that was overtaking more and more social movements. It has also raised a whole series of strategic questions, to which we will return in the second part of this text.

PS:

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[1] <https://www.gaucheanticapitaliste.org/pour-le-climat-union-sacree-ou-convergence-des-combats/>.

[2] On May 26, 3 elections are scheduled to take place in Belgium – elections for the European Parliament, regional elections and federal elections.