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Belgium

The red and green October

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The Belgian government triggered a massive wave of social protest last month when it attacked the 'bridge pension'. That pension is paid to those who have to retire early, such as workers whose company is 'restructured', those close to the end of their working years, and older workers in a 'heavy' sector, such as construction, where the hard nature of the work often shortens the working life. Prime minister Guy Verhofstadt's other targets were the ABVV [1] and ACV [2] trade union federations. The SAP/POS (Workers' Socialist Party, Belgian section of the Fourth International) explains the roots of the crisis and points a way forward in this extract from a declaration published in its monthly magazines, Rood and Le Gauche.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/belg_gs4.jpg]

The strike and the national demonstration on October 28 by the joint trade union front were a formidable show of force on behalf of the working people of this country.

The strength of the event, more than 100,000 activists, brought together the ABVV and ACV, workers, employees from the private and public sector, young people and the elderly, Flemish, and French-speaking persons, migrants and undocumented workers, all together.

October 28 largely confirmed the combativeness which had already been illustrated by the strike of October 7 carried out only by the ABVV.

Although in a number of sectors and companies the fight was initiated through the union leaders and the trade union framework, the success of this strike was above all due to the trade-union base which ensured the success of this strike and which eventually incited joint union action.

After Verhofstadt imposed the (fake) "Pact of solidarity between generations", floods of strikes and work stoppages arose and did not cease growing, and lead to the great flood of people of October 28.

From 11 and 12 October we saw work stoppages in a broad range of companies: Sabca, FN-Herstal, Caterpillar... On Monday 16 October the night shift workers at VW-Forest spontaneously stopped work. The following day, there were work stoppages on the different sites of Glaverbel as well as at Caterpillar, where a joint trade union front carried out a 24 hour strike. One after another the different power bases of ABVV and ACV rejected the government plan.

On Tuesday 18 October hundreds of ABVV and ACV metal workers demonstrated in Seraing. Since that day there have been strikes and the work stoppages at Carmeuse (Aisemont), Dolomies (Marche-les-Dames), Saint-Gobin (Auvélais), again Volkswagen, Alcatel-Etca, TechSpace Aéro (Herstal), MTS benelux (Florefe), Logisma (Namen), Norma (Malonne), the TEC (Montignies-sur-Sambre). On Monday 24 October there were general or partial strikes in Charleroi (involving 15,000 workers), in Namur and in Le Centre.

The ABVV and ACV leaders had therefore little space for doubt. In addition to the pressure from the tank and file, the trade-union bureaucracy was also worried about a loss of its negotiating choices for two reasons, at two levels. Firstly, on the federal level, the government increasingly imposes its politico-social agenda without wanting to reach an agreement with the union leaders (for example, when imposing the "cross-sectoral" agreement or the government measures to answer the rise of the oil prices, etc). Secondly, since trade-union leaders would rather the negotiate costs of "good redundancy plans" than fight for the maintenance and the extension of employment, the gradual

suppression of pensions also reduces their negotiating possibilities when companies plan lay offs. Instead of being able to position itself as an indispensable partners in the social bargaining, the trade-union leadership loses any credible position with employers and their own base.

Provocations

The employers' and politicians' provocations against the right to strike and trade-union freedoms were supported by a sector of the press (Libre Belgique and De Morgen always in the lead). Far from demobilizing the workers, this only reinforced their combativeness and their resolution.

The VBO [3] and Voka [4] threatened to exploit "all possible legal resources" to break strikes. The employers organized to utilize the courts in a unilateral way and to systematically use penalty fines to stop union actions. These provocations reached a grotesque peak on 28 October when Olivier Willocx, director of the Brussels chamber of commerce, circled above the demonstration by helicopter "in order to locate the infringements made within the framework of the strike". Employers thus now take over the role of the police force!

Faithful to its masters, the government, and especially Liberal home affairs minister Patrick Dewael, tried to intimidate the strikers. Liberal members of Parliament filed a bill aiming "defending the right to work" and to guarantee a "minimum service".

The interventions of the courts in social conflicts, the criminalization of the latter and the restrictions of the right to strike are unacceptable! On the contrary, writs should be served on the VBO and the government in order to note that they refuse to offer work to the 600,000 unemployed, and to Verhofstadt to note that it does not respect the promise to create 200,000 jobs!

To continue, unify and amplify the fight!

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/belg_gs2.jpg]

October 28 also illustrated the generalized and multiform character of social anger. With their declarations, their slogans, banners and signs, the demonstrators clearly expressed their dissatisfaction and their revolt: against increasingly precarious and degrading working conditions; never-ending reorganizations and redundancies; increasing social problems, privatization of public services; permanent mass unemployment; loss of purchasing power; blocking of the wages and the rise in the cost of living. It is anger at the impact of 25 years of neo-liberal policy.

It is also significant that those not directly touched by the "Pact" (at least for the moment) had been also mobilized in an important way: teachers, workers in the not for profit sector, etc. It is also necessary to underline the strong mobilization of young workers, whose presence was already notable in the strike pickets of October 7. A new trade-union generation is being born in the heat of the battle: a generation which did not experience the defeats of the fights against the Total Plan in 1993 or against the Social Pact in 1995; a generation which will not have known anything other throughout its life than crisis, mass unemployment and the precariousness of 'flexible' employment.

But in spite of the impressive potential and strong motivation, the trade union leaders do not offer any clear perspective for action and restrict the question to pensions. They fear - with reason - that with broader claims the door will open to more radical and stronger dynamics that they cannot check. They hope therefore that the

government will step back a little and accept new negotiations which can then lead to a number of amendments on the original plan. Then the union leaders can declare "victory" and ring in the end of the movement.

Compared with the scornful disapproval of Verhofstadt, who still wishes only to discuss the how to implement the plans, the union leaders blow hot and cold at the same time. On the one hand they talk about possible new action, but on the other side they prepare demobilization and ruin. The ABVV tried to find a way out and an agreement with the PS [5] even the day before the mobilization of October 28. The ABVV secretary, Jean-Claude Vandermeeren, seems to be ready to accept the negotiation, even on an ultra-minimalist basis. Luc Cortebeek (of the ACV) even explains that "we cannot incite people to action without chances on success". On the contrary: not acting in a given way only leads with certainty to failure!

The trade-union base must thus again make hear its voice and impose its own choices. The combat must absolutely continue without hesitation and for this reason it is necessary to call:

1. To maintain the pressure with a real action plan: revolving weekly general strikes, towards an unlimited general strike if necessary!
2. Clear objectives: immediate withdrawal of the "Pact of solidarity between generations". From this point of view, it is necessary to translate in a very concrete way and in each company and sector what the reform imposed by the government represents. The development of a charter of demands going beyond defensive demands - able to unify all the fights and all the questions is also necessary. [...]
3. To renew the tradition of a democratic trade unionism of struggle. In order to influence the fight durably and effectively, class-struggle trade unionists must organize themselves within their unions, create trade-union networks beyond the sectoral and professional borders, discuss and work out their points of view. They must debate their analyses, points of view and perspectives develop to present them afterwards democratically to all members of the trade unions.

Towards a new left party

With a government faithful to the orders of the bosses, the political question arises in an increasingly urgent manner for innumerable working people. Since this government refuses to hear the social majority, it is illegitimate and must leave! But how can we develop a political alternative?

The ABVV and ACV must first of all break with all the parties which apply the neo-liberal policies or which do not call them into question. Today the sp.a [6] and PS clash directly with the social movement. This is shown by: their attitude to social movement; their deafening silence on the serious attacks against trade-union freedoms; and the interminable scandals and abuse of community resources. The social democrats are light-years from the concerns, lives and expectations of working people. The ABVV must therefore sever the bonds with parties such as the PS and sp.a, which no longer wish to defend the interests of working people. As the BBTK [7] in Brussels already demanded, the representatives of ABVV must not be based in the party offices of the PS and sp.a.

Since their participation in the government, the Greens definitively lost their soul: they neither challenge neo-liberal policies, nor represent any real alternative. Rather than making a serious assessment of their governmental participation, they only want to be able to touch power, possibly even with the Liberals. Although they ask that the government launch negotiations concerning the "pact", they regret the strike action which "damages the economy

and the companies" and they say nothing on the challenge to the right to strike.

We must do everything to prevent the ultra-right-wing reaping the electoral benefits of the current discomfort and social dissatisfaction: of course its aspirations are the opposite of the generosity and solidarity which were expressed on October 28.

There is no alternative: radical trade unionists must put the idea of a new workers' party on the agenda. The social majority that showed its force on October 28 must absolutely find its political expression in a new party: 100% on the left; proposing a programme of rupture with neo-liberalism; a party which gives primacy to social needs, to the quality of living, to challenges on environmental questions; a party which dares to put forward an anti-capitalist perspective.

The SAP/POS wants to contribute with all its forces to the advancement of such a new party. To strengthen the SAP/POS is to reinforce that fight.

To read the full statement, in Dutch or French, visit www.sap-pos.org

[1] ABVV - Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond (Social democratic trade union federation, also known as the FGTB)

[2] ACV - Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond (Christian democratic trade union federation, also known as the CSC)

[3] VBO - Verbond van Belgische Ondernemingen (The employers' association, also known as the FEB)

[4] Voka - Vlaams Economisch Verbond (Flemish Chambers of Commerce)

[5] PS - Parti Socialiste (The Walloon social democratic party)

[6] sp.a - sociaal progressief alternatief (The Flemish social democratic party)

[7] BBTK - Belgische vakbond voor bedienden, technici en kaders (ABVV union for white collar workers)