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Belgium

Wallonia aganst CETA - what to do with this victory?

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This statement was published by the LCR-SAP, Belgian section of the Fourth International on 24 October 2016, after the vote in the Wallonia parliament refused the CETA thus blocking the signing of this deal planned for 27 October. Finally on 27 October an intra-Belgium agreement broke the deadlock. [1]

Victories against the neoliberal steamroller are so rare that they should be savoured and celebrated when they occur. The Parliament of the Wallonia ([French-speaking] region refused to give the Belgian government the green light to signing the CETA [3] and the Walloon government refuses to give in to ultimatums, threats and pressure from the European Union, the Belgian government, media business and the Flemish government.

A victory in the fight

This is unquestionably a victory against the dictatorship of multinationals and against the European Union, this zealous servant of neoliberal governance. “There can be no democratic recourse against the European treaties already ratified,” said Jean-Claude Juncker during Greek crisis. This is not the same type of treaty, but it is clear that the “no to CETA” of the Walloon Parliament resonates throughout Europe and beyond as a legitimate refusal to bow to this tyranny.

This victory is that of the struggle. It is the victory of social movements that for years have been denouncing the dangers of first TTIP, the AACC then, and rightly say that the second is the Trojan horse of the first. On Monday 19 September, 15,000 people demonstrated in Brussels to say STOP TTIP, STOP AACC. Organized on a weekday, late afternoon, without work stoppages, this mobilization reflected the fact that the awareness campaign had touched a wide range of people: from the farmers’ union to environmental organizations and consumer associations.

The introduction of private arbitration courts to which investors could complain and demand compensation if the standards (social, health, environmental ...) of a State are unfavorable are not the only reason for the anti-CETA mobilization . But it is one of the most widespread. The European Commission has tried to rescue the signing of the agreement scheduled for 27 October *in extremis* by proposing that this clause is initially not applied. But this concession was too small and came too late to reverse the situation. “Too little, too late,” as Churchill said...

A surprising political relay

The fact that the mobilization of social movements found a political extension at regional government level is a surprise. Indeed, the PS-CDH ruling majority in Wallonia leads a 100% neoliberal policy entirely focused on the promotion of capitalist investment. In addition, in 2013, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats (and the Ecolo, which was in government) voted for the European fiscal treaty (TSCG) which imposes the “golden rule” on national governments and gives the Commission despotic power to verify compliance of national budgets to neoliberal dogma. At the time, trade unions and other social movements had shouted their opposition to the text. In vain...

Today, nevertheless the “Walloon No” kicks open the anthill. It opens the debate that the EU wanted to stop it and

then tried to cover with the help of the mainstream media and all supporters of neoliberalism. They had their way! Without the slightest embarrassment, the Open VLD (Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats) advocated that Belgium sign the agreement, ignoring the Walloon Parliament; the libertarian Jean-Marie Decker dared to say that the Walloon government should be declared “temporarily incapable of governing” (like King Baudouin during the passage of the law partially decriminalizing abortion); VOKA (Flemish employers) estimated that the CETA was worth a community crisis; the idea that the EU should do without the agreement of Belgium was also discussed, and most media presented the Walloon vote as a disaster ...

The way that the Walloon authorities have maintained their position despite this pressure contributes to a spirit of resistance and revives the hope that it is possible to reverse the course of things. In Wallonia and Flanders but also throughout Europe. Given the history, it is nevertheless necessary to consider what is behind the determined statements of the Walloon Minister-President Paul, when he states his desire to “fight to the end” for “democratic principles” that ... he ignored when it came TSCG.

In fact, it is essentially for reasons of political tactics that the regional majority PS-CDH (Socialist Party and Humanist Democratic Centre) is resisting on this. Both parties are in opposition to a federal right government, backed by barely one quarter of the Walloon voters (those of MR (Reformist Movement), the Liberal party, of which Prime Minister Charles Michel is a member), and more hated for its ferocious austerity policy. At the same time, the two parties (and ECOLO the Green party) are abused in the polls by the breakthrough of the PTB (15%!). It is not enough to social democracy to denounce the federal government to regain the confidence of the electorate and maintain its hegemony over the leadership of the FGFB. The PS remains marked by the exclusion of the unemployed decided when its leader Elio Di Rupo was prime minister – an aggravating factor is that he is clinging to the presidency of his party. The closure of Caterpillar (6000 job losses in the city of the Walloon Minister President Paul Magnette) and lay-offs announced by the ING bank have further deepened the confusion and anger of the masses. Policies that roll out a red carpet to big business no longer pass ...

The masterstroke of Paul Magnette

Under these conditions, the move played by Magnette is simply masterful. By moving a piece on the chessboard, the Minister-President obscures indeed the nature of its regional policy (the "competitiveness clusters", the university at the service of industry, sales of arms to Saudi Arabia, etc.), blurs the balance of his party at the federal level, embarrasses the MR, traps the Flemish national Liberals of the NVA (main coalition party) with their own “confederal” credo, figures as an anti-globalization hero or even feasible challenger as President of the PS and captures the media attention away from Raoul Hedebouw, the very effective PTB spokesman. So he creates - at relatively low cost - conditions that could lead to social democracy 1) remaining the backbone of the regional majority; 2) returning to the federal government after the 2019 elections, as a “lesser evil”.

This point is crucial. The strategy of the lesser evil has been indeed undermined by 25 years of participation in coalition governments that have piled austerity plan on austerity plan. Part of the FGFB union bureaucracy has begun to doubt that the PS is still its political relay. Despite the economic downturn, social democracy must absolutely prove in practice that its participation in rightwing governments can make the difference... when it is supported by trade unions and other social movements. What is at stake is vital faced with the PTB that has abandoned its Maoist rhetoric for a left social democratic discourse, calls for a “popular front” while refusing to enter government in the framework of European diktats and, last but not least, defends the unitary Belgian state against the right of peoples to self-determination.

Time will tell if the Paul Magnette move involves repositioning the SP on other issues (European tax harmonization, for example?) And if this repositioning is emulated elsewhere in Europe within social democracy which – with the

exception of the Corbyn Labour Party – is sinking into the swamp of cuts and security policies. This is not excluded because it is not easy to return to the track after such a lurch. However, for now, nothing had moved in this direction, and we must not be fooled: the Walloon Minister-President is using the anti-TTIP and anti-CETA mobilization for political purposes not involving a break with neoliberalism. As proof, those statements where he stresses to free trade and that the AACC blocking is for him "a miserable failure, even if democracy wins" ...

Transforming this move into a new impetus

Then: victory or recovery? The future is open. The answer will depend on the ability of social movements to link the anti-CETA vigilance to mobilization against any austerity, which implies first reviving the fight against the actions of the right-wing government that the consultation strategy of the CCS and the FGTB leaderships led into a dead end. Respect for democratic forms only takes on its full meaning in connection with social and environmental content in the interests of the majority of the population: the working people, youth, women, farmers, undocumented migrants...

The representatives of these movement have the ability, if they wish, to turn Paul Mignette's move into a new impetus of the fight for another policy. They have the ability, if they wish, to develop an anti-capitalist emergency plan and to submit it to a further discussion at the grass roots, in trade unions, associations, neighbourhoods. If they want, they can impose on the parties who claim to represent the exploited and oppressed to form governments on this basis alone. In Wallonia and elsewhere, why not? Governments which, by their resolute disobedience to the dictates, will help to cut down the EU to open the way for another Europe.

[1] See BBC News [EU-Canada trade deal: Belgians break Ceta deadlock](#).

[2] See BBC News [EU-Canada trade deal: Belgians break Ceta deadlock](#).

[3] The [Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement](#).