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Covid-19 pandemic in Belgium

**“This constant search for
increased productivity will
promote the spread of the
virus”.**

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Johan (pseudonym) works in a factory which makes instruments for the medical sector, but which belongs to the engineering sector. Since the company is rightly considered to be an essential one, he has worked for the past two months. Johan is also an active union activist in the FGTB within his company. Thomas Weyts talked to him last week about how he and his family lived in lockdown, what it meant to be, unlike many other people, physically present every day at his workplace in recent weeks, his vision of politics, what he thinks of the lifting of lockdown and the prospects of the trade union movement in this crisis. [1]

Thomas Weyts: Hi Johan, you work in a company which is located in an essential sector, and you had to keep working. What has it been like at the workplace for the past few weeks? Have the safety rules been observed? How were the additional measures applied? Have you received materials like masks, soap and so on? How do the rules of social distancing work?

Johan: As employees, we have undergone constant adaptation of the rules. It is precisely because we were one of the companies considered essential that we witnessed an adjustment and a strengthening of the measures every week. In essence, strict hygiene was already necessary in our company, on the other hand we had above all to adapt to apply social distancing. The main problem was the shortage of masks in Belgium. Our union delegation, like everyone else, has been confronted with this completely new pandemic phenomenon. As for the government, its decisions in the first weeks were constantly fighting the last war! Will the union also learn from this? Today, if you work in a warehouse or a production hall, with the best will in the world, you don't always manage to keep a distance between each other. It just isn't possible. There is always a time when you are in default to keep the production process functional. You can, as much as possible, limit the possibilities of contamination, but nothing more.

TW: Since 4 May all kinds of businesses are once again allowed to operate fully, subject to a series of safety rules. What do you think about this?

J: I have a contradictory feeling. You should know that due to all the austerity policies carried out in the past, many families are simply in chronic financial difficulty. Even with technical unemployment, it is therefore difficult for many working families to keep their heads above water. Keep in mind that the median income is 1,700 euros. It's not much in the face of high housing costs and food prices. There is therefore enormous pressure to return to work!

On the other hand, in Belgium we experienced a gentle lockdown. Most of the workplaces that started closing did so from pressure from below. There was pressure from workers on the ground who no longer wanted to work without ad hoc sanitary measures because the employers had planned nothing. Yet most of them continued to work almost as if nothing had happened.

The question now is whether it will be possible to return to work. It is no coincidence that in Italy the centre of gravity of the pandemic is in Lombardy, the industrial heart of the country. The goal of business is to work as efficiently as possible for high productivity, which is at odds with "fighting the virus" during a pandemic. These are two opposite values because it is precisely this constant search for increased productivity that will promote the spread of the virus.

The question is whether one is effectively able to work with the current means of production and in the current production method without spreading the virus. Telecommuting is very practical when possible, but when you are a worker whose physical presence is essential to their work, you put your whole family under pressure and in danger. I do not know how much I endanger my wife or my children. To be sure to protect them, I should actually live

separately, away from my family. Yes, many of us really felt like shareholders' cannon fodder. And all those who now return to work can also inadvertently endanger their families.

TW: What do you think unions should do in the coming days in workplaces? What do you think of the idea that employees and their unions should have a veto over whether or not to reopen a workplace?

J: It is clear that unions are already very active in the area of workplace safety. On the issue of the veto: in the end, that is to say that when people do not do the work, there is no production. It's as simple as that but as everyone knows, the union is strong ... only when the workers support it. The members of the Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work (CPPT) must do their work as delegates. This right of veto therefore already exists, but it must be organized within the framework of a collective agreement.

TW: You and your partner who currently works at home also have school children. How have you been dealing with them in recent weeks? As parents, what do you think about the fact that schools could resume for a very short time? How to reconcile work and tutoring and childcare throughout the day?

J: We were already working parents before lockdown, you know. If you work as a team, you are nothing more than that: parent-workers. We are doing well, but half of the week, in turn, we are practically single for our family. It was our reality before the Covid-19 crisis, it is still ours today. However, we have fairly good accommodation with a courtyard and a good income. But for many families who live in a city apartment, in total isolation, the past few weeks must have been hell.

It is clear that the government is not focusing on the families of essential workers, but on those of the upper middle class. It is incomprehensible and deeply unfair to have allowed garden centres to reopen first. You are allowed to jog and bike, but not to play soccer with your five-year-old son. All the measures currently being taken to ease lockdown are in fact aimed at those who are already able to relax at home. It is so unfair that the owners of a second home by the sea are promised a piece of beach when it belongs to the community. At the same time, the people who saved the economy and kept society alive continue to be deprived of any opportunity for leisure! How is it possible? Take a simple example: a visit to the zoo. Well, for me, it would be socially normal to offer poor families a free subscription at this time. Especially when you know that 20% of children live in poverty, they would have at least a breath of fresh air (this would give a social veneer to the way the government is managing the crisis!). Symbolically, it would be much stronger than reopening garden centres so that the middle classes can shop there.

If the government had a little "social reflex", it would give families with few resources priority in the opportunity to let their children go back to school (with of course all the necessary safety measures). It would be a social measure that, moreover, would lighten the burden of crowded classrooms. These children could have benefited from more support during the Covid-19 crisis. But now, it is well known that if you are born to a poor family in Belgium, you have fewer opportunities. That said, I think what my kids are missing most today is exercise and the outdoors. This is their greatest deprivation. Fortunately, to keep them occupied, we had the financial means to provide them with tablets and a PC. But if we had not had them, it would have been impossible to take the courses at home. All school assignments have been sent online. My 8 year old daughter keeps her social life thanks to the tablet. She talks to her best friends for a few hours each day. My 5 year old son is fortunate to have a large room where he can let his imagination run wild. Is it ideal? No of course not. We were hoping that at least the schools would restart instead of the stores. We believe that the reopening of stores is only a measure of support for the economy. The government has decided to support the independent traders a lot, but who will go shopping in these circumstances? The victims of this choice are therefore, in our view, children.

TW: What do you think unions and the left should be tackling in the weeks and months to come?

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J: A friend of mine, Freddy, wrote on Facebook, something I also fear: "My fear is that the world will then be very similar to the world before, only worse". If we see that the big ones (the multinationals) are about to swallow up the small ones, this fear seems justified. How can we already calculate that half a billion people in the world will fall into poverty ...? And think of all those daily operations that threaten to change drastically or disappear. Cash payments have become the norm, collecting more data every day and further reducing privacy. Data which may be subject to commercial and political abuse. Homework, which eliminates horizontal contacts and solidarity in a workplace, reduces employees to having only individual contacts with their superiors or bosses. Which is not ideal for union work, for example. Even more online shopping, which suits Amazon, but further impoverishes social life and small businesses. What about already significant price increases? I am curious to see how the pressurization in the name of the crisis that will come from the business world will slow down the fight against climate change and the reduction of CO2 emissions. And then, still in the name of the crisis, they will claim that everyone will have to make sacrifices, but that while waiting for better days, the fight against tax evasion and tax havens must be muted! And why while we are at it not also invoking the fight against the virus to restrict the right to demonstrate?

In truth, I fear very much that they will begin to apply the doctrine of shock strategy to the letter. Naomi Klein's book of the same name explains perfectly how capitalism uses this kind of crisis to reinforce neoliberalism. We can already see this in the measures adopted. In Ghent, which is ruled by a progressive-liberal majority, the city wanted social workers in CPAS rest homes to give up their holiday pay (the measure was withdrawn after protests from unions and the PTB in the municipal council). All this happens while these same politicians applaud the care staff! How can they be so hypocritical? But even progressive governments are tied to the societal model of capitalism.

Did the government promise nurses a bonus? The idea has been abandoned ... While the epidemic is still raging, the first thing they do is get rid of the "heroes" and their bonus.

Because the hidden objective is to take advantage of this crisis to demolish all the gains of the working class, with the trade union movement, we must counter-attack. But as a union, what we sorely miss is an alternative vision that offers a deeper change than a better distribution of the pie. Since the fall of the Berlin wall, what is the project of society for the left that goes beyond the horizons of capitalism? With what ideological alternative can we get to work to build a just society?

Our unionism, based on the Social Pact, is a concerted unionism, but will this already weakened model survive this crisis? The question we have to ask ourselves is what kind of unionism we should practice in the future. The old model of combative unionism based on the pioneering role of a series of big workplaces is no longer enough and concerted unionism is under great pressure. Trade unions are facing major challenges but at the same time, the trade union movement in Belgium has remained standing; if there is now a country where we, as trade unionists, can look for a new way, it's very much here. But none of this will happen by itself, as we will as always have to fight for it.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Gauche Anticapitaliste](#).

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[1] As of 17 May, Belgium is reporting 54,989 coronavirus infections and 9,005 Covid-19 deaths, the highest per capita death rate in the world.