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Belgium

The PTB between rupture and participation

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Gauche anticapitaliste (“Anticapitalist Left” – Belgian section of the Fourth International) is presenting a list for the European elections, for an anticapitalist alternative worthy of the name. At federal and regional level, we call for a vote for the PTB (Parti du Travail de Belgique), in particular for candidates representing social struggles. Beyond our disagreements, the essential thing is indeed that here and now, only the PTB is in a position to inflict the most monumental slap in the face possible to the right and the far right, while sanctioning this so-called left (the Socialist Party (PS) and Ecolo (Greens) which rolls out the red carpet for them.

It's clear today just how much this 'monumental slap in the face' frightens those in power. That's why the political class and the dominant media are besieging the PTB to make it say that it is ready to participate in government. At the same time, many in the unions and associations want the PS, ECOLO and PTB to join forces to block the right. A complex situation. Caught in the crossfire, the PTB has responded by formulating its 'breaking points' for entering government. The problem is that the points put forward are far from sufficient to bring about a real break with the past. Why is the PTB adopting such a low profile? How does this relate to the history of the organisation and its limitations? And how can we go further, how, in today's reactionary context, can we bring about the political emergence of an anti-capitalist alternative that is equal to the challenges? These are the three questions discussed in this contribution to the debate by Gauche anticapitaliste activists.

The PTB has the wind in its sails. Although the polls should be taken with caution, its breakthrough is truly impressive. It is seriously destabilising traditional politics, particularly social democracy and the Greens. Given that the record of these parties is littered with renunciations and betrayals, it's pleasing to see them in trouble: it's like a revenge. It reflects the desire for an alternative. The PTB claims to embody both revenge and an alternative. Social, ecological, ethical, democratic, credible and radical. Turning its back on 'extremism', it presents itself as 'the authentic left'. A left that does not deny its values, that refuses to compromise, that puts its actions in line with its words and that proposes concrete changes. This is a major reason for its success.

But this enormous success has a weak point: the more it strengthens electorally, the less the PTB can avoid the question of participation in government. The PS and Ecolo are just around the corner. They, in turn, hope to take revenge on the party that is unmasking them and taking votes away from them. The calculation is simple: people will understand that there is no point in voting for a party of 'cowards' (Magnette) who refuse to 'take responsibility'. Pressure is also mounting within the trade unions. The FGTB (Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique) trade union federation says it openly: on the French-speaking side, it hopes for a united left to better relay its demands inside governments.

An inflection point

So what about participating in government? Until now, PTB spokespersons have been on the sidelines. To journalists, they would basically say: 'We'll see later', 'We're not strong enough yet', 'We have to start at municipal level', 'Look at Zelzate, it's proof that we're ready, if there's a real break'... But this line has become untenable. When you have become a major party that argues for the urgency of a left-wing alternative in the face of the growing threat from the far right, you cannot avoid the question of power. Power is by definition the goal of all politics. At the current stage of its electoral development, a PTB that avoided the question of power would probably begin its decline. This is why Hedebow and his comrades are today putting the conditions of their possible participation in the public debate.

This is a turning point.

It takes two forms.

On the one hand, the PTB is submitting a text entitled 'Voter PTB: pour une vraie alternative de gauche' ('Vote PTB: for a real left alternative') to a number of leading left-wing figures. The text condemns 'predatory and exploitative capitalism, which dictates the law and accumulates unlimited profits'. The signatories note that 'the picture is bleak'. They no longer want to 'settle for compromise policies that always end in stalemate. The 'without us it would be worse' approach is no longer appropriate, they say: 'the time has come to break with the past, to assert genuinely alternative policies, and to build new relationships of power'. They point out that 'the elected members of the PTB have demonstrated their ability to act within institutions in parallel with their struggles on the ground'. As a result, they 'share the hope and desire of FGTB President Thierry Bodson that, following the elections, serious negotiations will be held between the PS, Ecolo and the PTB, which will, arithmetically, be able to secure a majority in Wallonia and Brussels. Despite the PS's doublespeak and Ecolo's refusal to position itself clearly on a left-right axis,' they conclude, 'it is in any case important for us that the PTB, without denying itself, goes as far as possible in these negotiations.

Echoing this call, the PTB also identifies 'breaking points' at all levels of power (federal, Wallonia and Brussels). In its programme, this approach is justified as follows: 'We choose to break with the neoliberal policies of the last thirty years. This choice is necessary to respond to urgent social needs in terms of purchasing power, tax justice, an end to political privileges and the climate'.

So on the one hand we have a general intention - to break with the neo-liberalism of 'predatory and exploitative capitalism'; on the other hand we have a series of concrete 'breaking points' that the PTB sets out as necessary conditions for its possible participation.

A perilous exercise

As such, for anti-capitalists, this approach is justified. In the kind of situation we're in, we can't just advocate revolution, the destruction of the bourgeois state and soviet power. Nor can we be satisfied with the convergence of struggles at grassroots level, while sidestepping the question of their political outcome. This is indispensable. A politics of rupture must then include more than a program of demands and forms of struggle: to be credible, it must outline the perspective of a government of rupture, and show the way to impose it on the ruling class.

This is no easy task. In fact, it's an extremely perilous exercise, because the PTB has to say whether it is prepared to govern with the PS and Ecolo. And that's where the trap lies. Because one thing is crystal clear: no rupture worthy of the name is possible with the PS and Ecolo. None whatsoever. With these parties, it is futile to even hope for the beginnings of a break. The lessons of history and more recent events demonstrate this. Particularly for social democracy. It chose capitalism over a century ago. It is structurally incapable of going back. The last illusions have vanished since the 'social-liberal' turn of the PS in the 1980s. Since then, those who envisaged working with social democracy (and the Greens) on a path that would be 'anti-neoliberal' without being 'anti-capitalist' have fallen flat on their faces. And why? Because neoliberalism is the only regime compatible with the demands of capital at the current stage of its development. There is simply no other.

Consequently, for anti-capitalists, the only way to avoid the trap of government negotiations is to put forward 'breaking points' that meet three criteria: they must correspond to the key demands of the exploited and oppressed; they must form a limited but coherent set of measures, incompatible with the neo-liberal policy of co-management of the system; and they must be clearly part of a dynamic of anti-capitalist emancipation.

The 'breaking points'

Let's look at the PTB's 'breaking points' from this angle. First observation: they are limited to four areas - 'purchasing power, tax justice, an end to political privileges and the climate'. There is no 'breaking point' in the face of racism, Islamophobia, violence against women, LGBT-phobia, chemical pollution, neo-colonial plundering of resources or remilitarisation. As the abolition of closed centres for foreigners is not on the PTB's programme, it is not surprising (but more than deplorable!) that it does not constitute a 'breaking point'. But why are demands that are on the programme, such as development aid at 0.7% of GDP, or the cancellation of illegitimate debts, not 'red lines'?

The second observation is that the PTB's 'breaking points' in the four areas above do not make it possible to 'break with the neo-liberal policies of the last thirty years'. Let's take a closer look:

– Tax justice. The 'millionaires' tax' of 2% on fortunes over €5 million and 3% on fortunes over €10 million is "a red line" for the PTB. A tax on wealth is certainly a very important demand, but 1) the tax threshold (5 million!) is clearly too high; 2) 'taking the money where it is' also requires an increase in the rate of corporation tax (ISOC). It was around 33% until the government decided to lower it to 25% in 2019. Calling for a return to 33% is no more 'extremist' than demanding a return to a 65-year pension. The PTB programme does not do this. It calls for the effective application of the 25% to large companies and the elimination of tax loopholes, in the name of equality between SMEs and large companies, but this is not a 'breaking point'.

– The PTB has two 'breaking points' to 'protect purchasing power'. [1] First, to 'revise' the law on competitiveness; second, to 'reject European austerity', these 'European rules which would like us to make savings on pensions, health and public services'. This is really too limited. Why only 'revise' the law on competitiveness? It must be abolished! And why only commit to preventing new European austerity measures? European or not, we need to start abolishing the measures that have already plunged 15% of the inhabitants of Wallonia and 28% of the inhabitants of Brussels below the poverty line, particularly women. For example, a return to the individualisation of social security rights (imposed, without European diktat, by the 'socialist' Dewulf in 1981). This is part of the PTB's programme, but it is not a breaking point.

– Climate. The PTB's programme says many things: 'public and democratic control of the energy sector', 'public management of hydrogen networks', 'ecological planning', 'exit from the carbon market', 'ambitious public investment plan in renewable energies, housing renovation and public transport', and so on. We know that Raoul Hedebouw and his comrades are not anti-productivist. They are not calling for the abolition of unnecessary or harmful production. But all the same, at a time when the planet is burning, can we be satisfied with free TEC and STIB services as the only 'breaking point'? Why not reject the expansion of air traffic or the construction of new motorways, for example? Or denouncing the neo-colonial agreement (concocted by Green minister Tinne Van der Straeten) that allows Belgium to monopolise Oman's renewable potential, in order to produce in that country - tax-free and with the complicity of the local despot - the green hydrogen needed for Antwerp's petrochemical industry?

– 'Political privilege'. On this point, the PTB cannot be criticised for making a big gap between its programme and its 'breaking points': the key demand of its programme - halving politicians' salaries - constitutes a major breaking point for it. This demand is fully justified from an anti-capitalist point of view. The problem is the central place the PTB gives to it in its mass propaganda, the emphasis of this propaganda and the danger of confusing it with the 'everything is rotten' of the extreme right. This danger would be countered if the PTB demanded a rise in corporation tax and a cap on bosses' pay. Unfortunately, these demands are absent from its electoral programme.

Third observation: where the PTB has no chance of taking part in government (at federal level), its 'breaking points', although very inadequate, are nonetheless precise. The PTB will not enter the federal government unless it obtains: 'an end to wage freezes', 'a real tax on millionaires', 'the return of pensions at 65', 'the rejection of European

austerity' and 'an end to political privileges - in particular the halving of politicians' salaries'. At other levels of power, things are less clear-cut. For Wallonia, in addition to free TEC services, the PTB is proposing 'among other things' 'the establishment of a Walloon public waste service with no waste tax or paid bin bags'. For Brussels, in addition to free STIB services, it is proposing 'among other things' federal refinancing of the Region, an end to subservience to major property developers and the construction of 100% public housing. What does 'among other things' mean? The text does not say...

In conclusion, the PTB's 'breaking points' are: 1) too far down the socio-economic scale; 2) mute on feminist, anti-racist, anti-militarist, anti-colonial and anti-exclusion demands; 3) well below what is needed to begin to seriously tackle the ecological emergency in general, and the climate emergency in particular.

Gradualism and left-wing populism

There are two possible interpretations of this conclusion. They are not necessarily contradictory. The first is that the PTB does not want to come to power but is opting for a very low profile because it fears above all to appear as the party that has prevented the formation of more left-wing governments, which could harm it in the local elections. Above all, it is probably afraid of disappointing the trade unions, the FGTB in particular. That's why its breaking points focus on ending the wage freeze, tax justice and a return to the 65-year pension. The second is that the PTB is ready to 'take its responsibilities' if the results allow and the opportunity presents itself. The vagueness of the breaking points at Walloon and Brussels level seems to be an indication in this direction: don't tie your hands, you never know....

We'll see more clearly in a few weeks' time, so there's no need to anticipate. Be that as it may, this campaign brings the PTB closer to a qualitative threshold in the long evolution it began in 2007-2008. Back then, it decided to shed its image as a Stalinist, 'extremist', pro-Chinese party (originally anti-trade union and anti-Cuba!), justifying the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, the crushing of Tiananmen Square, the tyranny of North Korea (to name but a few). However, despite its new image and real changes, the PTB has retained something of its past: the dogma of the 'leading role of the Party' ('the Party leads the front') and, more broadly, the balance sheet of Stalinism ('globally positive', as Georges Marchais used to say).

Paradoxically, it is this remnant that is being expressed today through the 'breaking points'. The transition from maximalism to minimalism is a classic feature of Stalinist parties. Like its former rival, the pro-Moscow CP, and for the same reasons, the party led by Raoul Hedebouw and Peter Mertens is committed to a gradualist logic of 'small steps'. Like the CP before it, it has accompanied this with a strategy of 'soft power' by building its own associations (Intal and so on) and by taking control of sections of the trade union apparatus, such as it was.

This logic of small steps has a name: reformism. What the PTB is doing today looks more and more like reformism. We're not happy about it, because it's not good news for the left! But the truth has its rights. In view of the current campaign, it is legitimate to ask what still distinguishes the PTB from classic social democracy - social democracy as it was before it embraced the neo-liberal turn.

Of course, the PTB hasn't got its hands dirty in power; it is involved in most of the struggles. Of course, social democracy is pro-NATO, while the PTB leans towards the BRICS (though it no longer demands that Belgium leave the Atlantic Alliance). So the differences are obvious. The fact remains that the PTB's programme in these elections is not substantially different from that of social democracy. A typical example is the nationalisation of the banks. The PTB championed this. In its election campaign, it was replaced by the demand for 'significant public control over the financial sector' with 'the creation of public banks' and 'the separation of investment banks from deposit banks'. It's

an anti-neoliberal regulatory programme à la Joseph Stiglitz, not an anti-capitalist programme à la Karl Marx.

The signatories of the call to vote for the PTB are therefore quite right: 'programmatic convergences exist' with the PS and Ecolo. According to the Bureau du Plan, the PS proposal on wealth taxation is more radical in some respects than that of the PTB.

Could it be to hide these convergences that the PTB is pushing hard on what most clearly distinguishes it in the eyes of ordinary voters - 'the fight against privilege in politics'? Or is it to attract voters from the working classes, to whom its other 'breaking points' might not seem very appealing? Both, no doubt. The PTB's 'left-wing populism' sets it apart from the PS (and Ecolo!) Having said that, however, there are also similarities between the PTB and the PS in terms of strategy. Particularly in terms of the relationship between the party and social movements.

'Politics is the Party's monopoly' is the hallmark of social democracy. It sees itself as the political extension of social movements. The trade unions, in particular, had to subordinate themselves to the Party's electoral objectives and accept the limits of its gradualist strategy. At the end of the 1950s, when the FGTB, on behalf of the workers, wanted to impose its programme of structural reforms on the PS (a programme that contributed greatly to the build-up to the 1960-61 general strike), the latter opposed it with all its might. 'The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself' is not a slogan of social democracy. Nor is it a slogan of the PTB. We can see this clearly today in the way it determines its 'breaking points': according to its own political calculations in a given 'sequence' of its own construction.

For the PTB today, the 'sequence' is dominated by the low-profile but very real battle for influence within the FGTB apparatus. Hence the very socio-economic emphasis (in the narrow sense) of the 'breaking points'. But the PTB's approach does not really consist in relaying the trade union alternative politically, as the socialist left did at the time of the Structural Reforms. The example of taxation is significant: the FGTB is obviously in favour of taxing wealth, but it links this demand to others. The PTB, for its part, focuses its 'breaking points' on the 'tax on millionaires' alone. At the same time, its programme includes 'proposals to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)' (not just the small self-employed: SMEs). 'The Party leads from the front'. In the current 'sequence', the Party believes that the front it leads must be broadened to include SMEs.

What alternative?

It's easy to criticise, you might ask. What's your alternative, given that you represent nothing - or so little? It's true: our political current is more than modest. For many years it was in competition with the Communist Party and then with the PTB. And the PTB won. It has become a powerful party. Its hegemony on the left is indisputable, and it shines in Europe. We need to be able to acknowledge this fact, without bitterness or resentment. But it is possible to be small and issue a fair warning. That's what we're doing with this article. The aim is not to air our disagreements with the PTB. We have therefore not criticised the PTB's 'campist' stance in support of the BRICS, even though this stance is, in our view, in contradiction with 'the tenderness of peoples' (as Che Guevara said), in other words with internationalism. At a time when the PTB vote is the focus of many people's hopes, we wanted to point out the danger that a shift towards gradualism could pose for the entire left in our country, including the PTB itself.

It goes without saying that our criticism requires an alternative. In fact, not so long ago, the trade union left asked itself this question: how do we get out of subordination to social democracy and its gradualism? How could an anti-capitalist political alternative emerge without jeopardising trade union independence? The answer came in the form of a few bold ideas. It came from the leadership of the Charleroi FGTB, which at the time published a pamphlet on the subject: to bring to life 'a more combative and democratic form of trade unionism'; 'to draw up the

anti-capitalist programme that we, as trade unionists, want to see taken up in the political arena'; and on this basis to play the leading role in 'bringing together all those who aspire to an anti-capitalist alternative'.

The basic principle was simple: to turn the relationship between the social movement and politics on its head: 'We will draw up our programme and conduct our struggles on the basis of a single concern: the needs of working people. We will encourage them to become actively and democratically involved, so that this programme and these struggles are their own. Then we'll turn things around. Then we will regain our strength. Then, instead of the parties dictating their policies to us, we will be the ones demanding that the parties commit to fighting with us for this programme'.

'Strength to be regained'

This text referred to the 'strength to be regained'. This is a decisive point. Not only for the unions, but also for other social movements. Over the past ten years, it has become clear that the electoral breakthrough of a new party, even an 'authentic left-wing' one, cannot in itself halt the deterioration in the balance of power at grassroots level, in companies, schools and neighbourhoods. The song goes: 'There is no supreme saviour, no god, no Caesar, no tribune'. Let's add: 'nor party'. In fact, the deterioration can only be halted if the forces fighting on the ground converge, think, create, resist and set the tone for a reconquest of politics from below, with a clearly anti-capitalist and democratic perspective.

We saw the beginnings of this in 2012-2014, particularly when the CNE joined the call from the Charleroi FGFB. The assembly, which brought together 500 trade unionists from all walks of life, numerous activists from associations and the entire radical left (Géode de Charleroi, 2014), was a first concrete expression of the intention expressed in the 'Eight Questions' brochure: 'We don't want to set things in stone. On the contrary: it's about opening up a space and getting a dynamic going. The process of political regrouping must be extended to include left-wing members of the PS and Ecolo, left-wing intellectuals and community activists. (...) To a certain extent, we are inspired by the action of the 19th century workers' militants who worked to create the POB (the forerunner of the PS) because they understood the need for a political tool to strengthen their struggle. But we obviously need to learn from the way in which this political tool ended up eluding them'.

Our political current was enthusiastically involved in this ferment of hope and emancipation. The PTB was also involved. But, for the PTB, it was only a 'sequence' in its own construction. On the evening of the 2014 elections, having achieved its first breakthrough in Parliament thanks to the PTB-Gauche d'Ouverture lists, the Party blew the whistle on the end of the playground. No need to regroup, there's the PTB. There was no need to reverse the relationship between social movements and politics, the PTB was the synthesis. There's no need to open a space to create a dynamic: become a member of the PTB. The small embryo of a political tool that the trade union and associative lefts had begun to acquire by forcing left-wing political organisations to participate loyally in it has 'frozen'. 'The political tool eluded them'.

Ten years on, the ambiguity of the result is clear to see. On the one hand, the PTB is flying to an electoral triumph. So much the better for the Left as a whole! On the other hand, the 'breaking points' that it has determined on its own are far below the trade union programme, even further below the programme that the Charleroi FGFB adopted in 2012 in another pamphlet, and ignore other fronts of struggle.

Our alternative, you ask? To pick up together the thread of what was attempted in 2012-2014, drawing all the lessons from the experience. Apply the same method, taking into account the new context (geostrategic, ideological, ecological, political and social). There is no other way. In any case, we intend to build our own political current to carry this perspective forward more forcefully, with all those who understand its importance. Whether the PTB breaks

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with the past or participates in it will depend on its electoral success.

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

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[1] The left should banish this neoliberal expression since, in reality, workers' dependence on purchases on the market expresses their lack of any economic decision-making power. Marx showed this very clearly.