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Luxembourg

When the « Nee » almost won.

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The result of the referendum on the European Constitution held in Luxembourg on July 10th confirms the unprecedented crisis of legitimacy of the European Union. Despite an all-out propaganda campaign in favour of the Constitution,

Luxembourg, which the international press describes as the "spoilt child" of Europe, was the scene, while the campaign lasted, of an unprecedented challenge to neo-liberal Europe.

Though the "Yes" finally won with 56.52 per cent of the votes cast, against 43.48 per cent for the "No", the Christian Democrat-Socialist coalition government seriously feared, right up until the result was announced, a possible victory of the "No". Like France and the Netherlands, Luxembourg, in which the "No" campaign from the left progressed.

Whereas the "No" was being credited with 17 per cent at the start of 2005, the energetic groundwork for the "No", as well as the results of the French and Dutch referendums, changed the situation in this little country of 450,000 inhabitants (including 38 per cent of foreign residents).

A social vote

As in France and in the Netherlands, the social polarisation of the vote was clear. Sixty-nine per cent of self-employed people, 60 per cent of those with a university education and 51 per cent of white-collar workers voted "Yes".

The "No" vote came especially from the lower classes and from young people: 67 per cent of manual workers voted "No", as did 62 per cent of those under 25 (Eurobaromètre poll, July 18th, 2005). The geographical map of the vote follows in its main lines income levels and property prices.

The "Yes" vote was particularly massive in the zones where property prices have reached record levels: in the city of Luxembourg (62 per cent) and in the "fat belt" of rich suburbs that surrounds it (Strassen, Mamer, Hesperange, where the vote was over 60 per cent).

The results of the "Yes" were slightly lower in the rural regions of the East and noticeably lower in the agricultural North of Luxembourg, where they were around 55 per cent. The "No" was in a majority in the urban working-class areas of the South of the country: Esch-sur-Alzette (53 per cent), Differdange (55 per cent), Schifflange (53 per cent), Rumelange (56 per cent), Pétange (53 per cent), Kayl 53 per cent) and Sanem (53 per cent).

These areas, formerly centre of the mining and steel industries, are the historical strongholds of the political and trade union Left. Probably the "No" vote would have been even higher if a substantial part of the social layers most favourable to the "No" had not been excluded from participating in the vote because of their nationality.

The vote of Portuguese (14.5 per cent of the total population) and Italian nationals (4.1 per cent of the total population), who are often manual workers or employed in low-level white-collar jobs, would undoubtedly have increased the score of the "No" vote.

After the vote, political leaders and journalists put forward the supposed xenophobia of the "No" supporters as the

key element in explaining the "No" vote. These insinuations, inspired by a scarcely veiled class hatred (workers=idiots=xenophobes), were disqualified by an opinion poll conducted for the European Union after the referendum: 37 per cent of the "No" electors cited the risk of negative effects of the Constitution on the job situation, 23 per cent criticised the bad economic situation and 22 per cent thought that social Europe was not sufficiently developed.

Only 17 per cent cited opposition to Turkey joining the European Union as a reason for their vote (Eurobaromètre poll of July 18th). Although the social situation in Luxembourg is still more advantageous than in the other countries of the European Union, the country has experienced a noticeable increase in its rate of unemployment. It is today 4.4 per cent according to the official figures and 6 per cent if you count those people temporarily engaged in state-sponsored employment schemes.

Social discontent has also been fuelled by the privatisation and deregulation of a series of public services (post and telecommunications, rail, energy, local government public services) and by threats of relocating industry (Arcelor, Goodyear).

An eventful campaign

The particular social and political features of the "Luxembourg model" made the contest difficult for the supporters of the "No". The culture of political consensus remains strong in Luxembourg: political life is organised around the indestructible Christian Democratic Party (which has been in power since 1945, except for a five-year interruption), which chooses alternately the Socialists or the Liberals as coalition partners. As for the management of industrial relations, it is done in a "tripartite" framework that brings together the government, the employers and the unions.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/junckerwolwowitz.jpg>]

Luxembourg Premier Juncker with World Bank president Paul Wolfowitz

All the parties represented in Parliament - Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals, Greens, and, at the start, the populist Right [1] - approved the European Constitution. The leaderships of the Socialist and Christian Democratic trade union confederations also came out in favour of the Constitution, as did the employers' organisations.

The Prime Minister, Jean-Claude Juncker threw all his capital of popularity into the balance by threatening to resign if there was a victory of the "No". The icing on the cake of the Euro-sanctimonious unanimity was the contribution of Grand Duke Henri and of 98 of the country's 118 mayors.

The "No" was represented by forces that were in a minority on the political scene - De Lenk and the Luxembourg Communist Party [2] - as well as by personalities such as the former MP of De Lenk, André Hoffmann, the president of the Socialist rail workers' union, Nico Wennmacher, and a celebrated local lawyer, Gaston Vogel.

A Committee for the "No" to the Constitution, regrouping individual militants, members of ATTAC Luxembourg, of the student union UNEL and of De Lenk, conducted a massive campaign of fly-posting and distribution of leaflets, without receiving any public financing. Unlike in France, the absence of a political or trade union apparatus, or part of an apparatus, in the "No" camp limited the scope of the action of the opponents of the Constitution.

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The leadership of the Luxembourg Socialist Party was homogenous in its support for the Constitution and the

reticence of the militant Socialist rank and file was initially only expressed in private, before becoming public in the last two weeks before the vote.

Part of the middle cadres of the Socialist Party (in the South at least) were for the "No", but blind obedience to the leadership of the party predominated, and this was reflected by the most loyal layers of the Socialist electorate in particularly among older voters. It probably had hardly any effect on young electors.

The OGBL trade union confederation, linked to the Socialist Party, was more in tune with its members and its middle cadres: it finally abandoned the idea of a public campaign in favour of the Constitution. The leaders of the Greens conducted an aggressive campaign in favour of the "Yes", which ran counter to its historic base, which had remained loyal to pacifism and to the left ideals of the party's origins, but without leading to the emergence of a Green current in support of the "No".

In the context of the absence of representation of the "No" in the country's parliamentary institutions, the action of the Committee for the "No" was decisive: seen as a citizens' collective, without hidden partisan designs, it was able to crystallise part of sympathetic public opinion in the "No" vote. After having approved the European Constitution to start with, the populist Right, organised in the ADR, launched a late campaign for the "No", which did not have much real impact, because it was seen as too obviously motivated by opportunist considerations.

Economic nationalism

The omnipresence of the supporters of the "Yes" in the media and the country's institutions, the benefits that Luxembourg draws as a financial centre, as well as the presence of European institutions (Court of Justice, departments of the European Commission, Audit Office.) led at one point to fears of a pro-Constitution landslide. But the campaign of the "Yes" supporters and the text of the Constitution proved to be the best allies of the opponents of the Constitution.

The "Yes" supporters first of all wanted to have only a governmental campaign, financed by the taxpayers' money, vaunting the merits of the European Union and accessorially of the Constitution. But this campaign was countered by the work on the ground conducted by the Committee for the "No" and also by the importing of the French debate on the Constitution. Social discontent, which exists in Luxembourg, but in a latent state, was thus able to be publicly expressed with a virulence that the institutional parties had not anticipated.

From the moment that popular discontent with European policies became obvious, the supporters of the "Yes" had great difficulty in defending a text which basically proposed continuing and aggravating the policies that had been implemented for twenty years.

As the campaign progressed, the opponents of the Constitution succeeded in dictating the terms of the debate through their closely-argued criticism of the text, putting the supporters of the "Yes" on the defensive, in particular during face-to-face televised debates.

Whereas the "Yes" campaign was showing obvious signs of panic a month before the referendum, in particular by a chaotic debate on whether to maintain or cancel the referendum (three weeks before the date it was due to take place), it was put back on track by the intervention of the Prime Minister, Jean-Claude Juncker, and the entry into the campaign of the apparatus of the Christian Democratic Party in the final two weeks.

The political line of the "Yes" campaign was redefined around a fundamental nationalist axis: national unity around Prime Minister Juncker, depicted as a victim of the perfidy of Tony Blair during the abortive European Council of June 17th, 2005 on the budget of the European Union, as well as the defence of the fiscal and social advantages of Luxembourg. The question of Luxembourg's banking secrecy, which is usually skirted round, was highlighted: the opponents of the Constitution were daring to demand fiscal harmonisation in Europe!

The slogan of the Christian Democratic Party in the final phase of the campaign clearly revealed this nationalist accent: "The European Constitution: good for Europe, good for Luxembourg". One of the key points of the Christian Democratic propaganda material became the argument (partly true and partly false) that the Constitution would guarantee a weak Europe which would leave to the national states competence over social and fiscal policy.

The relative success of the nationalist "Yes" campaign was demonstrated by polls conducted before the vote: 68 per cent of the supporters of the "Yes" declared that they had determined their position above all in relation to Luxembourg's place in Europe and 88 per cent of them thought that the "Yes" vote would strengthen Luxembourg's position in Europe. On the other hand, 71 per cent of the supporters of the "No" declared that they had determined their position in relation to the text of the Constitution (ILRES poll of July 7th).

In the context of an all-out campaign by the "Yes" supporters and of the exclusion from the vote of an important part of the lower classes, the 43 per cent for the "No" is seen as a good result by the Left of the Left in Luxembourg. The referendum campaign in Luxembourg demonstrated, as had already been the case in France and the Netherlands, the gap between on the one hand the establishment and the political party machines and on the other the working class and young people who suffer from neo-liberal policies.

It is now up to the protagonists of the "No" campaign to continue the mobilisation. It goes without saying that this work cannot be confined to the narrow limits of Luxembourg. Contact with other progressive forces at a continental level will be decisive.

The European Social Forum in Greece next year and the stages of the coming mobilisation against the liberal directives of the European Commission will be the first steps in this battle.

[1] At the legislative elections in 2004, the Christian Democratic Party obtained 36.3 per cent of the vote, the Socialist Party 23.3 per cent, the Democratic (liberal) Party, 16 per cent, the Greens 11.5 per cent and the party of the populist Right ADR, 9.9 per cent.

[2] Dei Lenk arose from the convergence in 1999 of the Luxembourg Communist Party (PCL), the "New Left" group that came out of the PCL, militants of the Fourth International and independent militants. The PCL broke with De Lenk in 2003 on a sectarian basis, and has since conducted a neo-Stalinist policy, basically propagandist and self-proclamatory. At the legislative elections of 2004, De Lenk received 1.9 per cent of the votes cast and the PCL 0.9 per cent