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Belgium

A new “Black Sunday”

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Belgium's European elections took place amid relative indifference, not the least of paradoxes in the country which is home to the European Parliament. Significant regional elections (since Belgium became a federal state, the Flemish, Brussels, Walloon and German-speaking regions possess greater powers) were held at the same time and these commanded all the attention.

Two striking facts which emerge from the vote are the increasing asymmetry between the political situation in the North and that in the South and the spectacular new progress of the far right, with the latter being by far the most worrying phenomenon. [1]

In Flanders, the neo-fascist Vlaams Blok [2] scored 24.1%, or 981,587 votes. Nearly one million! Thirteen years after the first “Black Sunday” of the 1991 elections which saw the Blok reach the threshold of 10%, the poll on June 13 marked the patent defeat of the policies of “containment” pursued by the traditional parties in relation to the far right. This policy is summed up in the formula of the “cordon sanitaire” which involves the “democratic” parties refusing to make any alliance or coalition with the Blok at any level of power. On paper that seems very honourable but in practice this strategy acts as a boost for the Blok.

In the name of this “sacred union” the same neoliberal policies with disastrous social consequences have been accepted and applied by all the traditional parties, including the ecologists. Thus, the Blok appears to many as the only real opposition. The exacerbation by the traditional parties of rightwing nationalism, latent or open racism and fears over “security” and finally the treatment of the Blok as a party “like the others” by the Flemish-speaking media did the rest.

The figures for the Bloc's progress in Flanders are eloquent: They scored 15.5% in 1999 (the year the first Verhofstadt government came to power, promising to reduce by half the score of the far right!), They won 17.9% at the parliamentary elections of 2003 and 24.1% this June 13, taking 32 seats (+10) out of the 124 in the Flemish regional Parliament. In fact, the Blok is now the biggest party in the North of the country given that the social-Christian party CD&V, which nominally came top of the poll, only did so through its electoral alliance with the N-VA, a small formation resulting from a split in the defunct nationalist party Volksunie. [3] It is in any event without question the biggest Flemish-speaking party in Brussels, the biggest party in Antwerp (Belgium's second city) and it came first in many localities, which does not augur well for the communal (municipal) elections in 2006 when the “cordon sanitaire” will undoubtedly fall apart.

In the French-speaking part of the country, several commentators point out that the far right did not reach the same heights as in Flanders. There is however no reason to rejoice. While, unlike the Blok, it has no structure, no charismatic leader and no access to the media, the Front National scored 4.7% in Brussels (where it doubled its number of deputies in the city's Parliament from one to four) and 8.1% in Wallonia (where it doubled its score compared to 1999 and saw its number of deputies in the Walloon Parliament quadruple from one to four, more than the Écolo party). In certain localities, like the canton of Charleroi, the FN reached 17 % and came in second position after the PS. Thus, by going from 3.9% in 1999 to 5.6% in 2003 and 8.1% (8.8% if the scores of rival far right splits from the FN are added) in 2004, the Francophone far right is experiencing the same rate of progress as the Vlaams Blok in Flanders.

Asymmetrical polarizations

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This new progress for the far right is accompanied by an asymmetrical polarization between the various areas of the country, which is likely to complicate the possibility for the bourgeoisie of ensuring a stable federal government. Initially because the liberals, the motor force of this government, were left weakened by this poll, especially the VLD of Guy Verhofstadt which went from 24.2% in 2003 to 19.8% this time. Then because this federal government is a “violet” coalition between the socialist parties (the Francophone PS and the Flemish SPa, with their ally “Spirit” which emerged from Volksunie) and the liberal parties (the Francophone MR and the VLD). June 13 upset the regional majorities, until now more or less similar to the federal majority.

In the South, the PS scored 36.9% in Wallonia and 28.8% in Brussels where it overtook the MR, which also fell back slightly in Wallonia. The skilful double language of PS president, Elio Di Rupo, bore fruit. While flattering and reassuring employers, he also put a left spin on his discourse. The social-Christian CDH (ex-PSC, former “party of the state”, in opposition since 1999), made progress again, especially in Brussels, while the ecologists confirmed their decline with little more than 8% in Wallonia and in Brussels. Driven out of the federal government since their rout of 2003, the Greens have drawn no serious assessment of their disastrous participation in a neoliberal government.

In Wallonia, the PS, CDH and Écolo together accounted for 63 % of the vote while in Flanders it was the right that dominated, with a total of 70% for the VLD, the CD&V and the Blok. Holding all the cards to form new majorities in the Walloon, Brussels and French Community of Belgium parliaments, the PS has chosen to form regional coalitions distinct from the federal one: in Wallonia with the CDH and in Brussels with the latter and Écolo.

In Flanders, the new majority has not yet been composed by the “victorious” Cd&V/N-VA party, but it is practically certain that it will choose a coalition with the VLD and the SPa/Spirit to counterbalance the Blok, the ecologists of Groen! (ex-Agalev) having refused to take part in the new regional government. It should be stressed that in exceeding by two points the threshold of 5% to maintain elected officials, they have avoided the pure and simple disappearance of their formation, which had been predicted after their rout in the 2003 parliamentary elections when they won 3.9%. In any case they are not essential for the CD&V. In short, this composition of asymmetrical governments will reinforce the centrifugal forces which make Flanders and Wallonia two increasingly distinct and demarcated societies.

These elections have once more underlined the total absence in Belgium of an alternative “to the left of the left” and the parallel defeat of the “sectarian left”. Although both contested the election, neither the Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB, Mao-Stalinist) nor the Movement pour une Alternative Socialiste (MAS, ex-Militant, Belgian section of the Committee for a Workers International) reached 1%. The PTB, which has “purged” its national secretary in the pure Stalinist tradition, gained some good scores in some localities around Liège, but it primarily owes this to the absence of any competitor list from the Francophone Communist Party, which has always been relatively well established electorally in these localities. The CP [\[4\]](#) is going through a significant internal crisis whose most visible sign is the indefinite postponement of its congress. The POS (Belgian section of the Fourth International) was absent from the poll, partly owing to the modesty of its forces (it underwent a significant crisis from which it is slowly but surely recovering) but especially because of the absence of any credible unitary perspective.

It should be stressed that the social climate is not promising. Demoralization and fatalism are spreading, struggles are rare, the trade-union leaderships are inert and inept in the face of the repeated blows of the government (among others against the rights of the unemployed) and the employers (whose latest whim is to lengthen working time to 40 hours per week, without any wage increase of course). Hope cannot come either from a movement for global justice which does not have the massive forms of expression or the radicalism which exist in other European countries. Moreover, with the participation of social democracy and Christian democracy, either in the regional governments, or at the federal level, the principal trade unions, the FGTB [\[5\]](#) and the CSC [\[6\]](#) could, if not pressured by their rank and files, assume even more responsibility for keeping “social peace” to help their “political friends”. In this context, against neoliberalism, against the employers, the right and the far right, the need to build a strong unitary

anti-capitalist political alternative is more pressing than ever. Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

[1] The scores of the traditional parties in the European elections were pretty similar to those in the regionals:

– For the Francophone electoral college:

Mouvement Réformateur (MR, liberal right) - 27.58%;

Parti Socialiste (PS, social democratic) - 36.09%;

Centre Démocrate Chrétien (CDH, Christian Democrat) - 15.15%;

Écolo (Green) - 9.84%;

Front national (FN, neofascist) - 7.45%.

– For the Flemish-speaking electoral college:

Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (VLD, liberal right) - 21.91%;

Sociaal Progressief alternatief (SPa, social democratic)/Spirit (center-left nationalist, originating from a split from Volksunie) - 17.83%;

Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V, center right)/Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA, center-right nationalist, originating from a split from Volksunie) - 28.15%;

Groen! (ecologist) - 7.99%;

Vlaams Blok - 23.16%.

[2] The Vlaams Blok, a neofascist party, emerged from the fusion in 1979 of two far right Flemish parties, the Flemish Popular Party (VVP) and the Flemish National Party (VVN).

[3] Volksunie, a centre nationalist party founded in 1954, split into two parties in 2001: Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie, center right nationalist and Spirit, center left nationalist.

[4] The Communist Party lost its last deputy in 1987. It has practically dissolved in Flanders.

[5] FGTB-ABVV, Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique/Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond, has nearly 1,200,000 members and is aligned with the socialists.

[6] CSC-ACV, Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens/Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond, more than 1,500,000 members. A third, smaller, trade union federation CGSLB-ACVLB, Centrale générale des syndicats libéraux de Belgique/Algemene Centrale van Liberale Vakbonden, claims 220,000 members.