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Covid-19 pandemic in Belgium

# In Belgium too, the virus strips away the mask

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**Belgium is no exception to the rule: here too, the arrival of Covid19 has changed social, political and daily life. The first days of March were punctuated by demonstrations and strikes by women, the stagnation of negotiations for a federal coalition and by the wrath of the PTB (radical left), pending other annual demonstrations (notably anti-racist). In a few days everything accelerated. On 10 April, Belgium officially counted 3019 deaths from the corona virus and 5610 people hospitalized, including 1268 in intensive care, out of 1900 places available in the country. So 58 % of beds are occupied, with saturation in certain hospitals in Brussels, Hainaut et Limbourg.**

## **A minority government ... with special powers**

While Belgium was well on its way to achieving a new record for the absence of a full-fledged federal government, the Charles Michel coalition having fallen in December 2018, the coronavirus crisis exerted extreme pressure on the various parties who were in negotiations, which led to a compromise agreement that does not offer sufficient democratic guarantees. The Flemish Christian Democracy, which had been dithering for months in these negotiations by linking its fate to that of the hard-nationalist right of the N-VA, has finally accepted the idea of a coalition of crisis around the Liberal Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès, previously responsible for current affairs. Almost all the parties represented in Parliament, including the Social Democrats and the Greens (with the exception of the N-VA and the far right Vlaams Belang - the PTB abstained) have given a vote of confidence to the Flemish- and French-speaking Liberals and to the Flemish Christian Democrats who made up the outgoing federal government.

The same parties, with the N-VA this time, have granted special powers to this government, for three months, renewable once, which allow it to govern by decree, bypassing the agreement and control of Parliament. An executive that the Socialists and the Greens refused in extremis to join and which is therefore ultra-minority in its representativeness in Parliament ... but responsible for " saving " the population from the epidemic. Having had bad poll results, which show it being overtaken by the Vlaams Belang, even more to the right, the N-VA zigzags, going from the quasi-denial of the epidemic to demands for curfews ... before Jan Jambon, minister-president of the Flemish region envisaged a rapid return to work, like Trump. The nationalists have lost a battle against the liberal "neo-federalists", with a clear strengthening of the central government in this crisis. The PTB, which abstained on special powers in Brussels and in Wallonia, maintains its position of left opposition to the government, but wants to be " constructive ", when almost all the parties are singing the chorus of national unity.

The government therefore has broad room for manoeuvre, including endangering provisions of the labour law, even though some safeguards have been provided on wages. It also enjoys the support of the media, and of a large part of the population as well: Wilmès, the first woman to lead Belgium, plays on a " benevolent " communication to better sow confusion in people's heads. But this well-groomed communication is beginning to crack as the weeks go by and the problems of the policy of neoliberal-authoritarian management of the crisis become more and more visible.

## **Confined of all lands, keep working**

As Daniel Tanuro has summed up so well , the government is trying to limit the damage of the epidemic by

minimizing the costs for capitalist enterprises and their activities (thus by exposing a large number of workers ), remaining within the neoliberal framework, by making health workers and " families ", in other words women, bear the brunt of care work, while completely stopping social and cultural life. It is therefore a neoliberal, patriarchal and authoritarian capitalist response to the epidemic.

The government decided on March 12 to generalize containment a little faster than in southern Europe, but it is also the only (or almost the only) response to the epidemic. This rapid confinement, in an epidemic with an exponential curve, can make a big difference. It is impossible to say at this stage if that will be enough to avoid carnage, but there is reason to doubt it! The problem being that great vagueness has accompanied the measures of " social distancing " which have been adopted in several stages. And even after March 12, when all social and cultural activities were cancelled, priority was given to maintaining as the last and only activity at risk, productive economic activity. The words of warning and the contradictory injunctions of the Wilmès team are accompanied by threats of repression: the police, clearly visible on the streets, have the power to impose immediately payable fines or criminal charges against those who do not comply with confinement. Young people from lower-income neighbourhoods, often trapped in buildings that are too small and unsanitary, are stigmatized, and informing on one's neighbours is becoming partly acceptable. Racism lurks in ambush behind " national unity ". Belgian-Moroccans do not see any effort by the government to get them repatriated from Morocco and undocumented migrants are hunted down and dispersed by the police in a fairly violent fashion.

Faced with this, social struggles have multiplied in many enterprises (Audi, Volvo, Decathlon, Leonidas, Neuhaus, Brice, Bombardier, Safran Aero, Sonaca, Arcelor and many others) where protests and work stoppages have forced the National Security Council to tighten the screws on certain companies and sectors. The union leaderships have agreed with the bosses to establish a list of essential sectors where work can be authorized with fewer - and therefore more dangerous - measures of social distance. This list includes sectors that make sense (food, pharmacies and health care for example) but the devil is in the detail. For example, all petrochemicals are considered " essential ", including those used to make perfume or plastic gadgets! The president of the FGTB (Socialist union) called for the union of " the whole of society. Politicians, employers, unions", also welcoming the unity of political parties. In the retail distribution sector, anger is raging at the lack of protection of the staff, at infernal work rates, at the hours that the government is proposing to extend from 7 am to 10 pm! Among home helps, there is also the anxiety of seeing their meagre wages cut even more or of risking working without protection in many cases.

## Deep cuts in healthcare and failure of the invisible hand of the market

" Now we give treatment, afterwards we settle our accounts, " insists the collective "Health workers in struggle". Indeed, there will be accounts to settle! To start with, the fact that Wilmès was Minister of the Budget in the previous government, which carried out cuts in health (health insurance, hospitals, etc.) of more than 2 billion euros, while she spent 35 billion euros to order F-35 warplanes. But that is not all: not content with having weakened and undermined the health system, which is starting to show signs of deterioration, the same people who form the Liberal-Christian team of Wilmès , and in particular the Minister of Health De Block, haven't added a euro to the health care budget. Worse, since hospitals have had to postpone a gigantic number of medical operations to focus on Covid19, they might not receive any money (since they are funded according to the number of operations ...) and their government has ... lent (!) a billion euros so that they do not file for bankruptcy. A billion that will have to be repaid. So, settle the accounts, especially as the health sector has been fighting for almost a year for better working conditions and wages. The pressure from the mobilizations of the two unions and the collective "Health workers in struggle", combined with the absence of a federal government in recent months, had enabled Parliament to release a "health workers" fund of 400 million euros. Union officials have unilaterally given it to the government for the fight against the coronavirus, hoping that the government will remember it in the future. No comment!

The government has set up a daily public information session, every morning at 11 a.m., on the state of the epidemic in the country, but the country still does not have, two months after the first case was recorded in early February, the ability to conduct sufficient tests. While official figures show 12,775 cases, numerous testimonies pour in from people with all the symptoms of Covid19 but who are not tested for lack of sufficient equipment. Epidemiological studies mentioned in the mainstream media indicate a probable figure of between 100,000 and 400,000 people infected in the country. Likewise, the government, which has taken the liberty of using geolocation data from telephones to trace movements, gives no clear idea of the areas most affected, or of hospitals that are near saturation point. Behind Wilmès' speeches, the reality on the ground is expressed by numerous statements in the media and on social networks, denouncing in particular the enormous health risk run by exhausted health personnel who are largely under-equipped in protective material, such as the 3000 workers from the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Liège who took the Prime Minister to task.

Our activists who are working in the health sector confirm : we've had enough, we are likely to reach risk saturation point in the coming days, the personnel work even when they are sick and some of them blame themselves for risking not only their own lives, but especially those of their patients and colleagues.

There are reasons enough to be angry. When doctors warned Minister De Block on February 28 about the pandemic, she amused herself by twittering against "drama queens" and "whining" journalists. The government has so much trouble obtaining FFP2 masks that it had to take responsibility from De Block and transfer it to an ad hoc minister, with so far still as little success. The neoliberal government, endowed with special powers, is counting on private initiatives to produce sufficient masks and disinfectant gel. The "invisible hand of the market" shows here all its ineffectiveness: the price of this material is soaring, and the people who need it most don't have it! Part of the population and prisoners are sewing masks to try to protect themselves. A distillery has begun to produce hydroalcoholic gel and the FGTB of the Metal sector (automobiles, etc.) has asked companies to produce respirators. The situation is also very bad in retirement homes and other health centres, not to mention prisons, which have already experienced some riots, and detention centres for migrants. The fight against the prison state and for the regularization of all undocumented people is more relevant than ever.

It is a macabre style of management that the government is imposing: an ethics commission was mandated to establish criteria when health workers will have to decide who to try and save and who to let die. The Belgian geriatric society has recommended not to hospitalize residents of retirement homes.

## Government solidarity with the bosses

The governments are endowed with special powers, notably to loosen the purse strings in order to support bosses struck by the cessation of their activities and who must recognise, sorry about that, that without workers, no wealth is produced. Bonuses have been granted to the sector of hotels, cafes and restaurants in particular. Although the cultural and sports budgets are being maintained in the short term, nothing is certain for the months and the year to come, given the historic scale of the recession which is beginning. More than a fifth of workers in the country, or 1,200,000 people, are today paid by temporary economic unemployment benefits (70 per cent of gross salary as against 65 per cent before the epidemic), that is to say by Social Security, which risks seeing its deficit also soar. Among precarious workers and the informal sector, it is social carnage. Many of them are left with little or no resources for the coming weeks and months. Stress increases with social isolation and family responsibilities, since most children are at home. The question of rents is posed with force. Some emergency measures have been taken by the government, such as the requisition of hotels for the homeless in Brussels, the creation of a Doctors without Borders centre in the capital and the suspension of evictions and water and energy cuts. But this is still largely insufficient compared to needs, certainly when the crisis is going to set in and debts are going to accumulate.

In this context, the government does not for a second envisage going back on the billions of tax gifts given to bosses in recent decades, nor obviously creating a wealth tax: on the other hand neoliberal economists are flying kites by evoking cutting by half the annual holiday period for example, potentially offset by the distribution of bonuses to households. In some companies, the bosses do not hesitate to put their workers on temporary unemployment while demanding that they continue to work from home: the arrogance and indecency on the part of employers never take a break.

## Resistance and solidarity

Faced with this crisis of unprecedented magnitude, which is developing at a speed that can become paralyzing, while confinement and the ban on assembly threaten to atomize the social body and the resistance, there are glimmers of hope. First, as in other countries hit by the virus, concrete and local solidarity is being organised: mutual assistance in the neighbourhood for shopping or meals, producing handmade masks, support for the homeless and undocumented, psychological support, solidarity funds, etc. Social media groups serve as an information exchange and support interface. In Brussels, more than 15,000 people have registered. A quarantine watch has also been set up to document repression and the risks of authoritarianism that exist today.

In many neighbourhoods people go out every evening to make noise, to make music, to chant slogans in support of the health sector. Unfortunately, although militant collectives like "Health workers in struggle" and "Spread solidarity not the virus" provide political content in solidarity with the popular classes that are critical of the government, the latter, well helped by the mainstream media, is trying to depoliticise and take over this initiative to make it a simple "thank you to the health workers", so much so that some health workers have expressed their uneasiness with thanks that do not replace either protective material or inadequate staffing. And because it is not up to the resourcefulness of the people to systematically compensate for the blunders and failures of neoliberal governments.

Furthermore, social struggles have passed into virtual mode (15,000 people participated in a virtual anti-racist event, for example) and flyposting (on windows, balconies, walls, such as for the right to housing last weekend or even visuals of "Health workers in struggle". Activists organize themselves in videoconferences when the means are available, meetings, conferences and political education are organized in the same way and with the same possibilities and limits. Social and political life is certainly hard hit during a pandemic, but it is far from stopping. We also note that what had become inconceivable today for 99 per cent of political forces, such as the reconversion of factories for immediate social needs, the shutdown of non-essential sectors, price controls, emergency social measures, etc., is now of the order of the "realistic" or "conceivable" in particular by health workers, but more widely in society. The inequalities aggravated by confinement constitute another element of a possible radicalization of a part of the population in the face of a system which shows in a striking manner that it is not there to protect either human life or nature. It is starting from the resistance of workers to stop production, from the exasperation of workers on the front line (health, cleaning, food), from feminist demands for the care given to humanity and social life to come before profit, that the anti-capitalists and revolutionaries of Belgium and elsewhere are drawing up a programme of rupture, looking to the mass mobilizations which will have to resume as soon as possible. Because we really will have to settle our accounts.

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