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Belgium and anti-racism

Black Lives Matter: Huge Popular Success

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On Sunday 7 June several organizations launched a call to rally in different cities of Belgium. The starting point for this momentum was the desire to show international solidarity with the mass anti-racist movement around Black Lives Matter in the United States, which has taken to the streets of the country since the police murder of George Floyd. These spontaneous calls (often from people who had never organized a demonstration or rally before) sometimes aroused fear or tension, for example around the fact that it should be an opportunity to denounce racism, violence and police abuse, police killings, ... in Belgium too.

Over 15,000 nationwide

Almost 1,200 people gathered in Antwerp, on the Steenplein, 750 others in Albert Park in Ghent and 200 people participated in a sit-in in Hasselt. In Brussels, more than 12,000 people gathered at Place Poelaert. There were many statements: from undocumented people to demand regularization, from families of victims of police killings who demanded justice, from anti-racist activists and decolonial activists, ... A number of speakers in Brussels denounced the denial of the crimes of Belgian colonialism (severed hands, the role of Leopold II, the looting of rubber and other raw materials, the destruction of villages, slavery, etc.). They called for decolonizing school-books and public spaces.

The crowd was multicultural and gender mixed. There was an enormous number of young people and many demonstrators were displaying, as during climate demonstrations, signs with anti-racist, feminist slogans or those for the rights of LGBTQI + people, ... It was obvious that the people present at this rally did not only want to listen but that everyone wanted to make a political contribution to the movement. The most popular were undoubtedly "Black Lives Matter" and "I can't breathe anymore". We could also read: "Human rights are not privileges", "The silence of white people is also violence", "Racism is a pandemic, be the vaccine", "Cowboys in the movies, not in police stations", etc. Some slogans expressed a radical vision.

The demonstrators and the organizers were well aware that the pandemic is not yet over and many masks were distributed to guarantee maximum security. If the police of Philippe Close had authorized a demonstration, the safety distances could also have been respected. The repression of struggles is not good for our health. There is no doubt that we would have been many more without this pandemic.

The difficulty, which aroused some tensions in the previous days, lay in the importance of supporting the self-organization of black and Afro-descendant people, gathered together at a historic moment, while also making possible a broader gathering in solidarity with all victims of police violence and of different forms of racism, all in the context of numerous messages circulating instantly on social networks. The absence of the family of Mehdi Bouda, a young Brussels man killed by the police last summer, testified to this difficulty. The organizers, who had finally included all police violence and discrimination in their platform, also read a text written by the family of Mehdi, a symbolic high point.

Points of convergence started to be built in preparation for this rally and that is extremely important. Despite the organizational difficulties, it really was all the communities that came together yesterday to denounce all forms of racism: negrophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, romaphobia, anti-Asian racism, etc. To win, the fight against racism will need to bring together all the communities affected, respecting the autonomy of specific struggles against these different forms of racism, and connecting these struggles to the fight against capitalism, which needs racism in

order
to function.

Police provocations

We knew it before we got there; the police do not like the left, hate demonstrators and hate reports of police violence. In Brussels, some provocations (racialized young people were forced to get out of the metro before arriving at the right station, comrades were provoked by the police,) had started before the demonstration but no one fell into the trap. At the end of the event, the organizers announced that access to the Louise roundabout (the easiest way to take the metro) was closed. The only possible exit point was the street leading to Place Royale. It was therefore a spontaneous demonstration which went towards this square and which found itself face to face with a cordon of mounted police protecting the "neutral zone - a zone where it is forbidden to demonstrate. A coincidence?

A few minutes later, several police vans drove through the crowd with sirens wailing, provoking general indignation and booing and jeering. This anger set off a movement of panic. The tension was palpable and the atmosphere became heated following these provocations. How could we contain the anger of these young people who came to demonstrate peacefully, who are harassed daily by the police and who, once again, had to undergo provocations from the police, who did everything to raise the tension? They were deprived of everything and were emerging from several months of confinement in extremely difficult conditions. We must refuse the demonization of these young people, the goal of the police and the far right. We understand their anger and we support their rights in the face of state repression and the fines and convictions that are likely to rain down on them.

The violence and riots that followed are only the consequence of a racist and extremely unequal society, defended by the police. Yesterday's event was a massive and politicized movement of rebellious youth. The society of spectacle promotes the circulation of images of the riots rather than the speeches made during the rally: let us not fall into the trap. Another sign that the police wanted to tarnish the image of the rally: a video made by a journalist who was trying to film the arrest of a person who was face down, on the ground with two police officers with a knee on the him (an image that reminds us of what happened to George Floyd). The journalist was directly verbally assaulted by a police officer who prevented him from filming and who also resorted to physical assault by pushing him back.

We remember, however, that the police themselves broadcast images of arrests in Anderlecht a few days ago. We therefore note that the press and citizens are prevented from filming when it is not convenient for the police. Filming is however a right.

We also discovered a testimony by Mounaïme, 19 years old, beaten up in a police van by five hooded policemen) We demand that light be shed on this violence and that justice be done.

In Antwerp (the city of which Bart De Wever is mayor), between 100 and 150 people were arrested on the pretext that they did not respect safety distances ... to be then piled up together in vans. They were released during the night with a fine of Euros 250.

The anti-racist wave is still in its infancy

For several decades, in Belgium as in many other countries, the fight against racism has struggled to attain a mass scale. Bourgeois politicians have played the racism card to maintain their ideological domination. Despite the

attempts by the police and the Liberals to discredit the movement, what happened last Sunday was an important step which saw the self-organization and the collaboration of black, decolonial and anti-racist organizations, all this with the support and the presence of members of the CCIB (Collective Against Islamophobia in Belgium), the UPJB (Union of Progressive Jews of Belgium), human rights organizations, leftist organizations and even (too few) unions...

One of the challenges for the future is to build a broad movement to combat police violence and abuses, challenging the police institution itself, integrating the fight against racism, against patriarchy, against LGBT-phobia, ... Likewise, the focal point of convergence between anti-racist collectives made up of black people will undoubtedly lead to new mobilizations on the issues of negrophobia. This movement is called upon to develop and bring to light concrete demands which can continue to mobilize thousands of people in the near future.

Union activists and affiliates, the heart of the organized working class in Belgium, must join this movement for the rights of all workers and our democratic rights, because the police regularly attack (legally or not) our rights to demonstrate, our right to strike, our rights to inform... They must do so because the plural youth that mobilized yesterday will be one of the motor forces of the struggles to come and finally because the working class cannot win by letting hundreds of thousands among us be crushed because of the race or religion that is assigned to them. The Gauche Anticapitliste will continue to support these battles as best it can.

After one of the biggest anti-racist demonstrations of this century in Belgium, all hope is allowed.

8 June 2020

Special report from Flanders

Despite ban more than 1200 antiracism demonstrators in Antwerp

More than 1200 demonstrators of all possible colours and faiths took to the streets of Antwerp on Sunday 7 June 2020. They responded to an appeal, which circulated on the social media. The organisers called for a peaceful and silent demonstration. With respect for the necessary hygiene measures, such as keeping sufficient distance from each other.

Nevertheless, the demonstration was not permitted by the city council. Fortunately, many did not allow themselves to be intimidated as a result. Stewards from Antwerp's progressive associations were responsible for maintaining order. The police were hardly noticeable during the action itself. Unfortunately, the Antwerp police did find it necessary to gather more than 100 people on and around the Groenplaats after the action, to transport them in vans and to give them a GAS (local administrative fine) fine.

Racism virus

The demonstrators first and foremost wanted to express their solidarity with the Afro-American inhabitants of the US, targeted by white policemen. At the same time, this was only one of the reasons why so many wanted to demonstrate. As one of the speakers put it: "Racism is a virus that kills people. Also in Belgium. But now it's enough!"

Democratic rights

The organisers had tried unsuccessfully to get permission for similar events in six cities in Flanders. Only in Halle did the mayor allow formally an event to take place. Everywhere else they got negative answers, although the actions elsewhere were 'tolerated' (the local organisers always received a GAS fine). The speaker received a lot of support with these words: "From tomorrow (June 8th) we are allowed to go to a café with ten people to get drunk. Surely it can't be that we wouldn't be able to use our constitutional freedoms the day before then!"

Hope

This event in the largest city in Flanders is an important and hopeful sign. While polls indicate that the fascist and racist Vlaams Belang might become the biggest party in Flanders (showing around 25% in the polls), here it is shown that the countermovement is not only numerous and diverse, but also determined. While observing eight minutes of silence - an impressive tribute to the murdered George Floyd - the fists were raised en masse in the manner of Black Panther. Rightly so!

8 June 2020

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