

Elections 2014 in Belgium: the LCR-SAP will campaign with the PTB

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The end of the tunnel is far from being in sight. We are only at the beginning of a gigantic offensive by European capitalism against the world of labour, youth and women. Since 2008, in the European Union (EU,) more than two billion private bank debts have been transformed into public debts, and these debts serve as the pretext for a ferocious austerity.

The sacrifices imposed on the majority of the population aggravate deficits and recession. But the dominant class continues to pursue them. Why? Because its objective is not purely economic but strategic: it wishes to break social resistance, dismantle what remains of the “welfare state”, reduce the public sector to its simplest expression and structurally weaken the trade unions. The drift of the employers’ discourse on competitiveness is revealing: for the bosses, it is no longer enough that “labour costs” are aligned with other European countries — it is henceforth in the context of the world market, faced with the “emergent” capitalism of China and elsewhere, that workers on the old continent should be “competitive”.

The EU, capitalist war machine

The European Union and its governments are at the service of this cruel and unjust policy. The very structure of the EU is in fact a capitalist war machine, and provides an alibi to national governments: “It’s not us, it’s Europe”, they say. But Europe is them! The new European treaty (TSCG) which inscribes the “golden rule” in marble, is down to them! The Fortress Europe which repels, imprisons and deports asylum seekers is down to them. The Council, the sole body of effective power, is made up of heads of state and of government. The European Parliament has virtually no real power. The Commission, alone authorised to propose legislative initiatives, is made up of member states.

The influence of the employers’ lobbies has recently again been highlighted by the draft Commission communication on the electricity market. This text has been dictated by the fossil fuel sector and the Round Table of European industrialists. The employers want less renewable fuels and more shale gas powered stations as in the United States — to cut costs. And so much the worst for climatic disasters, the danger of which has nonetheless been shown by the typhoon which has ravaged the Philippines! The fact that a former Goldman Sachs employee — Mario Draghi — heads the European Central Bank is symbolic: all these institutions are linked to big capital which exploits labour and

pillages natural resources.

Social neoliberalism

Needless to say, social democracy is collaborating in the offensive of social regression and ecological destruction. In Germany, Britain, France, Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal... everywhere, the “socialist” parties have applied the neoliberal and productivist programme. In Belgium, the PS and Sp.a [1] have been in government for twenty five years. A lesser evil? No: as in other countries, the “socialists” have actively contributed to the dismantling of numerous social conquests (early retirement rights or unemployment benefits) and public services (under-financed, deregulated or indeed privatised), to the security crackdown and the transformation of taxation at the service of the employers and the wealthiest. They are now ready to attack the trade union counter power, by breaking collective agreements and discrediting workers’ struggles. As in other countries, this favours a slide to the right in public opinion: a rise of racism, Islamophobia, sexism, of each for themselves and the far right.

The polarisation to the right coincides in Belgium with a community polarisation. This specificity should not lead to the false conclusion that the PS and the Sp.a are the last rampart against a division of social security. Behind the scenes, the PS has already agreed with the MR [2] and the Cdh [3]. And that of the far right. What message does the president of the PS give when, as mayor, he criminalises begging in Charleroi? Who, if not the far right, benefits from the police violence that the PS mayors of Brussels and Saint-Josse have unleashed against Afghans and against the squatters at the [former convent of] Gèsu? A dangerous dynamic is established, paving the way to coalitions still more to the right — with or without the PS and Sp.a.

2014, what is at stake?

It is in this general context that we must locate the parliamentary, regional and European elections of May 2014. What is at stake for the left? Continuing a policy which, in the name of the lesser evil, plans the exclusion of tens of thousands of the unemployed ? No, the argument that “without the PS it would be worse” is “an insult to our intelligence” — as the regional secretary of the FGTB of Charleroi, Daniel Piron puts it. The real issue is to open a first breach in the social democratic and Green monopoly over “left” parliamentary representation. To provide an anti-austerity political solution to the despair and anger which is accumulating in a section of society. To show to the PS and Sp.a that the time is coming when they can no longer fool their social base with fine promises, thrown aside when the elections are over. To set up a marker towards a new political expression of the exploited and oppressed.

Almost everywhere in Europe, the degeneration of social democracy (and the Greens) is freeing up political space for left forces. Belgium has until now been an exception. This is the result of a multitude of factors: social democratic control over the trade union base and the low political level of the social movements on the one hand, and the Stalinist sectarianism of the main left formation — the PTB [4] — and the inability of others to unite on a lasting basis around an innovative anti-capitalist project, on the other. However, this situation is changing. Two elements witness to this:

1. The evolution of the PTB, which has allowed it to grow and realise an initial breakthrough in the communal and provincial elections of October 2012;
2. The fact that more and more trades unionists and activists from other social movements understand the need to fight also at the level of a political alternative.

Taking responsibility

The LCR has thus decided to stare reality in the face and take responsibility, having in mind the interests of the workers as a whole. In Flanders, our comrades of the SAP have concluded an agreement with the PTB: we will be present on the PVDA+ lists. The common press release of the two organisations is clear: “For the first time in a long while, the elections of May 2014 offer the possibility, by a vote for the PTB+, to have left elected representatives ... which will give a clear voice to the fight against austerity policies... The PTB and the SAP have a different vision on a number of questions. By this agreement, we strengthen the left. Thus, we can help advance the fight against austerity, unemployment and for a radically social, ecological and democratic alternative|”.

The situation in Francophone Belgium is different: the PTB is not as hegemonic there as in Flanders. Above all, the appeal of the FGTB of Charleroi-Sud Hainaut and the echo it has received (notably in the CNE) allow hopes for a first step in the direction of a deep going recomposition of the workers’ movement, both at the political/electoral level and at the social/trade union level. This chance should be seized. That is why the LCR has worked for months on a proposal which responds to four objectives: the desire of the trade union left to set up a marker towards a unitary political alternative to the left of the PS and Ecolo [5], the legitimate concern of the PTB not to abandon its profile, the autonomy of other left formations and the desire of independent “personalities” to participate in the process.

Emergency anti-capitalist programme

Success will depend in the first place on the PTB. It has the cards in its hands. In Francophone Belgium, the “emergency anti-capitalist programme” of the FGTB of Charleroi-Sud Hainaut constitutes a solid contribution to the regroupment of forces. It is mainly on this basis that the LCR will take its responsibilities. We hope that others will do the same, because today it is the only way for the appeal of Daniel Piron and his comrades to receive an initial political and electoral form – and it is essential that it receives one, however imperfect. The LCR (and the SAP in Flanders) maintain their complete political independence in relation to the PTB. We will lead our own campaign by calling for a vote of preference for our own candidates who will defend our programme: anti-capitalist, internationalist, feminist, eco-socialist.

Some will claim perhaps that the “the LCR is kowtowing to the PTB” and so on. It is ridiculous. “They are them, we are us”. We prove it in solidarity with the Syrian revolution, in the fight against the trade union bureaucracy and patriarchy, in the defence of eco-socialism and the self-organisation of struggles. As the Flanders press release says: “the PTB and the SAP have a different vision on a number of questions”. At the same time, the PTB is changing, everyone can see it. We follow its evolution, hoping it will break with Mao-Stalinism without breaking with anti-capitalism... and without adopting the purely verbal pseudo-radical posture of the Greek or Portuguese CPs. But these questions, important as they are, will not stop us from loyally campaigning so that Raoul Hedebouw and Peter Mertens are elected to the Chamber... and all the better if they are not alone. Our wish: that this is the beginning of a new period of common left struggles.

LCR (Belgique)

Footnotes

[1] The Parti socialiste belge (PS) and the Socialistische Partij Anders (Sp.a) are the two Belgian social democratic parties - since 1978 the two parties have had independent structures. Since December 6, 2011 they have been in a coalition government with the neoliberal right, led by Elio Di Rupo (PS)

[2] The Mouvement réformateur (MR) is a neoliberal cartel of the Francophone and Germanophone right which participates in the government of Elio Di Rupo

[3] The Centre démocrate humaniste (Cdh), formerly the Parti social-chrétien (PSC) is a Christian Democratic party which participates in the government of Elio Di Rupo] that the next government would drastically reduce employers' social security contributions. In reality, it is the social neoliberal policies of the PS and Sp.a which fuel the rise of the national neoliberalism of the NVA [[The Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (NVA) is a right wing Flemish pro-independence party, which has been the biggest party in the Belgian parliament since 2010

[4] The Parti du travail de Belgique - Partij van Arbeid van België (PTB-PVDA), of Maoist origin, obtained 1.55% of the vote at the federal elections of June 2010 and made significant advances at the communal elections of 2012, with 47 communal representatives and 4 provincial representatives elected (2 in Antwerp and 2 in Liege)

[5] Ecolo is the Green party in Francophone and Germanophone Belgium, with eight federal deputies - its Flemish equivalent, Groen, has five deputies