

## **Belgium: social democratic hegemony disputed**

Twenty-five years of uninterrupted participation in government. With the possible exception of their Scandinavian counterparts, few European social democratic parties boast a record similar to that of Belgian social democracy. Almost three decades later, the tide might be changing. In Flanders, social democracy no longer commands 15% of the votes. In Wallonia, polls indicate the Parti socialiste is at risk of losing 12% of its support, falling back to a mere 20%. A concomitant surge in support for the radical Workers' Party of Belgium might change Belgium's political landscape.

### **Belgium's neoliberal turn and social democracy**

Social democracy, including Belgian social democracy, played a central part in spreading and implementing neoliberal measures throughout Europe. In public debates, even social democratic members of Parliament readily admit this now. In Belgium, the neoliberal turn started towards the end of the seventies. Crisis was rampant in Belgium. Yearly inflation rates went up to 12%, and between the summer of 1974 and that of 1975, about 70.000 workers lost their job.

The social democratic Minister of economic affairs, Willy Claes, made a vaguely Keynesian attempt at economic recovery. The state was made to pay for the restructuring of industries as coal, steel, ship construction, textile and glass. It bought parts of private enterprises, rationalising production or modernising factories, socializing losses, only to disengage from or reprivatize the companies afterwards. Public expenses increased rapidly. From 43.6% to 63.1% of GDP between 1974 and 1981. Government deficit jumps from 2.7 to 12.6%. By 1983, public debt comes close to 110% of GDP.

Misguided as it undoubtedly was, in the midst of an economic crisis, government policy was clearly not the only culprit for the increase of public debt. Public debt and deficit will nevertheless be at the heart of arguments for neoliberal and austerity policies. Right-wing governments block salaries, devalue the Belgian Franc, install price controls, attack pensions and health insurance, while lowering corporate tax rates. The measures fail to lower public debt, which skyrockets to over 120% with purchasing power plummeting.

By 1986, coordinated social action eventually brings down the government. Electorally, this will spell the dawn of almost three decades of social democratic participation in government. Socially however, social democratic trade unionists are surprised and disappointed that no clear directions come from their parties. Movement building appears subordinated to electoral success. "Vote for us", rather than "develop power relations and struggle" seems social democracy's guiding principle. More remarkable still, when the social democrats re-enter government in 1987, right-wing measures are not turned back. Hard austerity is replaced, not by a softer variant, but by one with a social discourse.

From 1992 onwards, coalition governments of mostly Christian- and social-democrats will cut, privatise and reform as never before. Willy Claes, in turn, will be handsomely rewarded for his services. He becomes head of the Party of European Socialists, and later, NATO secretary-general. Almost simultaneously, the public bank CGER-ASLK and the National Investment Company are privatised straightforwardly. Under impulse from the European Union, the groundwork is laid for the privatisation of railway, postal and telecommunication services. Health care becomes more expensive, social security loses over a billion euros. Rather than changing course, twenty-five years of social democratic coalition governments will bring equally many years of social regression.

## **The relative decline of Belgian social democracy**

During the fifties, Belgian social democrats accounted for over 35% of the votes. By the 2000s hardly a quarter of the Belgian electorate still identified with social-democratic parties. Belgian social democracy hence appears to follow a general, albeit modest, European pattern of decline. This, however, is only part of the story.

Very much unlike any other federal state, Belgium today lacks a federal or national constituency. A citizen from the Walloon city of Liège is never able - not even at national elections - to vote for a Flemish party. This is a consequence of subsequent constitutional reforms aimed at decentralisation or federalisation of the central state. As the dynamic was one of decentralisation and regional nationalism, some fundamental building blocks of a federal system were “forgotten.”

Accordingly, from the seventies onwards most Belgian political parties split according to language. The left wing Workers’ Party of Belgium (PTB-PVDA) prides itself in being a bilingual national party, but the Belgian Socialist Party (BSP-PSB) split up into what are now the Flemish Socialist Party Differently (SP.a) and the French-speaking Parti Socialiste (PS).

From the very start, both parties faced different realities. In Wallonia, the French-speaking south, the Parti socialiste regularly gathered over one third of the votes. The SP.a, or its predecessor the Socialist Party, contended hardly 20% of the votes in Flanders. In 2010, the SP.a struggled to make the 15% mark, missing it in the subsequent federal elections of 2014. The difference had to do with distinct social-economic and historic factors. With industrialisation delayed in the North, the Catholic Church and its networks obtained greater influence amongst the workers, offering a decisive advantage to the Christian-democratic trade union. Its connections to the pro-labour wing of the Christian-democratic party understandably affected electoral outcomes.

The general decline in party membership also hit the SP.a hard. The party’s membership fell, from around 116.000 in 1981 to less than 50,000 in 2014, only just beating the nationalist N-VA. For a left-wing party, traditionally or theoretically relying more on organisational networks than popular media, this was a clear hit. Next to its support for neoliberal austerity, corruption scandals undoubtedly contributed to the decline of Flemish social democracy. After becoming NATO-secretary general, Claes was forced to resign a mere year later because of the Agusta scandal. After the murder of a social-democratic politician, an investigation revealed that the Italian helicopter manufacturer Agusta and the French aircraft concern Dassault had bribed several officials and politicians. Both Belgian social democratic parties were at the heart of the scandal. In addition to Claes, the federal ministers of foreign affairs and defence, Frank Vandenbroucke and Guy Coëme, as well as Walloon ministers Guy Spitaels and Guy Mathot, had to resign. All of them were social democrats.

Both parties, notwithstanding attempts to broaden their base, traditionally perform well with salaried popular classes. The increasing middle-class profile of the SP.a made them lose touch with the “street.” Macron-style Antwerp SP.a mayor Patrick Janssens would incarnate the culmination of this tendency. Initially, in Flanders, it was the far-right, which captured many disillusioned social democratic voters also in working class bastions like the Port of Antwerp. Offering hope for the Left, things might be changing. When the renowned Flemish weekly Knack visited the Port of Antwerp, a senior port worker told them: “People haven’t forgotten here in the port what reforms the Socialists

approved.” By 2012, managerial socialism had cost the SP.a so many votes that it lost control of the city of Antwerp for the first time in 60 years. The Left PVDA-PTB surged to 8%.

### **Blossoming seeds of decline**

Turning to the PS, the 2014 election campaign appears pivotal. The PS party chair Elio Di Rupo, who a decade earlier had been one of the more radical social democrats at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, went into the elections symbolising the outgoing government. The PS could no longer claim to be a social alternative to power. It incarnated power, and to many, austerity. Its core message boiled down to “without us, things would be even worse..” Simultaneously, the new PTB-PVDA had used its strong organisational foothold and increasing presence within struggles to grow.

Two specific measures taken by the outgoing government would prove particularly toxic to the PS. The first one was a measure popularized as the “exclusion of the unemployed.” Young unemployed were entitled to a so-called “insertion allowance” of about 500 Euros a month, albeit after a waiting period of 12 months. The Di Rupo government decided to limit this allowance to three years. The social democratic trade union mentioned up to 50.000 unemployed youth losing their allowance. In total, the measure could touch over 100.000 people. These youngsters were punished not because they were not looking for a job – a condition to apply for the insertion allowance - but because of a lack of availability of stable employment. Many of the affected youth had either not worked full time for 12 months during the last 18 months, or 18 months on 27 depending on their age. Consecutive short periods of interim labour proved insufficient to avoid losing the benefit. Anti-poverty organisations, trade unions, and other pillars of civil society rallied against the measure.

The party’s defence improved nothing. Instead, the PS stuck with the “worse without us”-adagio. For a progressive party, that is not a very inspiring message. In a much-derided statement, Di Rupo would claim later that his heart was bleeding for the affected people.

Another major problem for the PS during the campaign, turned out to be their direct connexion to European austerity. The discourse of a “social Europe” - a central part of social democracy’s European vision - had been losing traction. Under social democratic guidance, Belgian federal and regional parliaments approved the European Fiscal Compact or Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (TSCG). Social democrats were an indispensable part of the majority voting in favour of four-letter abbreviation. It was the Di Rupo government that signed the Treaty, and social democrats that ratified it. The half-hearted opposition of the Ecolo Greens, opposing the treaty when in opposition, but supporting it in government, allowed the Left to take advantage of this unambiguous social democratic support for austerity.

Voters got the narrative that social democracy would not do away with austerity. Rather on the contrary, all traditional parties agreed that the Belgian government would not only comply with, but even defend, the entire framework of budgetary and debt discipline desired by the European Commission. This had not always been self-evident. In the European Parliament, Belgian social democrats had not voted for all the texts of the Six and Two Pack regulations, which allowed them to claim they - at least somewhat - opposed austerity. The TSCG vote undid this spin. What was the point of voting against part of the Six-Pack in the European Parliament, only to wholeheartedly accept the TSCG?

## **Looking for alternatives**

Discontent was abundant. People had been looking for an alternative for quite a while. Increasing inequality and poverty, traditional party arrogance, added to a general disconnect between politicians and the people, created a desire for change. But the contenders were not always up to the challenge.

Towards the end of the nineties, the Green movement had capitalized on a feeling of discontent. Especially the French-speaking Green Party, Ecolo was not necessarily left wing, but incarnated change. With a dioxin-poison scandal dominating the 1999 electoral campaign, the ecological parties surfed to victory almost doubling their votes. The social-democrats shrewdly invited the Greens to govern together. The Greens accepted and immediately joined liberal-social democratic coalition governments at all levels of power. With the benefit of hindsight, it is plain to see how this allowed social democracy to pull the Green party into the system. Green government participation led to their major election defeat only four years later.

All those years, the PTB-PVDA had been too small and inward-looking to take advantage of opportunities. The party seemed to show little concern for the people's day-to-day living conditions and engaged insufficiently in smaller struggles, reinforcing a perception that it only wanted to impose its larger narrative of societal change. Since the party's congresses of 2008 (Congress of Renewal) and 2015 (Solidarity Congress), it has broadened and refined its general approach, focusing more on raising awareness, organization and mobilisation, including in its style and communication.

Earlier corruption scandals had not put the hegemony of the Parti socialiste at risk. Many people stuck with the PS, notwithstanding scandals and realpolitik. For the working class, the right-wing liberals offered no alternative. With the evolution of the PTB-PVDA, this changed. Those disillusioned by social democracy could start looking left.

Even more since the 2014 election of 8 MPs, two national and six regional ones, gave the Left a qualitative advantage it had not enjoyed for decades. According to a March 2017 poll, the PTB-PVDA might eventually surpass the social democratic Parti socialiste (PS) in Wallonia. This poll confirmed an internal PS poll putting the PTB-PVDA ahead of the PS in the province of Liège. The fine details of the poll results are questionable. The next elections might well see the PS remain ahead of the PTB-PVDA. A general tendency appears undeniable. A landslide similar to the one seen in the Netherlands is no longer unthinkable. For the first times in decades, social democracy is at risk of losing its absolute hegemony on the Left in Wallonia. Echoes of internal PS discussions spoke of an unexampled crisis.

## **Is this the opposition?**

The formation of a right-wing federal government following the 2014 elections should have facilitated PS revival. All the more so since the federal government turned out to be extremely unbalanced, with only one French-speaking party joining three Flemish parties. With influence throughout the state apparatus, local authorities, social democratic trade unions, mutualistic health insurance schemes, development organisations, social democracy certainly lacks no tools to launch a counter-offensive.

Yet, turning things around has proven difficult. The media have suggested different reasons for this. With Di Rupo still party chairperson, credible opposition to government austerity remains hard. At the federal level, right-wing politicians regularly hit back at PS criticism arguing they did the exact same thing. With the support of his party's grass-roots militancy, the charismatic PTB-PVDA MP

Raoul Hedebouw succeeded in pushing his party to the foreground as the opposition to government anti-austerity plans.

At the Walloon level, the PS held on to power, but for now failed to change perception. Instead of austerity, it promised “rigour” to the Walloons. The nuance was lost on many. Of the over 25.000 people losing insertion allowances between January and August 2015, 66% were Walloons. Checks by the Walloon employment agency clearly did not differ from the ones in other regions. The centre-left Walloon government did hence not put a break on the implementation of the antisocial measures the Di Rupo government had voted.

Under pressure to renew his party’s street credibility, the Walloon prime minister, Paul Magnette, briefly refused signing CETA. A broad coalition including peasants, trade unions, development and health associations, as well as many citizens’ collectives, made themselves heard. The PS, which had gone along with the negotiating mandate initially, could no longer ignore them. Popular pressure played a central part in determining Magnette’s position, as did the growing popularity of the PTB-PVDA. In the end however, the treaty was signed, without substantial changes. It remains to be seen to what extent Magnette and the PS get their narrative of a “new CETA” across. Contradictions between the party’s national stance, speaking of real changes to CETA, and continued opposition to the treaty in the European Parliament are no details.

Magnette, a university professor, raised to prominence in 2007 when Elio di Rupo asked him to mediate amidst a corruption affair hitting the PS hard in the city of Charleroi. Several PS councillors are accused of fraud with public funds and undue influence on public procurement contracts. Today, another scandal impedes him to build on any political capital gained on CETA.

The PubliFin scandal paralysed immediate rebranding of the PS. On the contrary, the December 2016 scandal consolidated the image of a PS involved in about every possible scandal. The PubliFin scandal started in Liège, one of the strongholds of the PS. Some members of the intercommunal enterprise, led by André Gilles (PS), were revealed to earn up to 516 euros a minute for useless meetings. Public money was used to generously offer positions to a self-serving political class. The revelations startled the PS. Initially, the PS-minister in charge refused to step down. When he eventually did, Magnette found no replacement without links to PubliFin. The PS then refused a Walloon inquiry committee, only to accept it after public outcry. The PTB-PVDA had to publicly fight for a seat on the committee. André Gilles had to go after a witness accused him and his brother-in-arms Stephane Moreau of forging and destroying documents. Faced with disastrous polls, the entire Liège party leadership resigned. When PS-chair Olga Zrihen is shown to earn over 7000 euros monthly, having additionally netted about 3600 euros to preside the Senate’s Pensioners fund. When asked about this, she replies “I didn’t check the amount.” To people struggling to make ends meet, such a reply merely reinforced the image of politicians out of touch with reality.

### **Towards cooperation?**

In such a context, a thorough clean-up of the PS appears a *conditio sine qua non* for meaningful cooperation with the Left. Towards PTB-PVDA, the PS has so far used carrot-and-stick tactics. Jean-Claude Marcourt, Walloon minister of economy, called the party Stalinist and antidemocratic. In the city of Seraing, the local PTB-PVDA section regularly struggles to rent rooms from the social democratic mayor. In Mons, Elio Di Rupo tried to co-opt the party into the city administration.

The Left party’s reaction was prudent. Left cooperation with social democracy should reinforce the Left, not water it down. Locally, in the North, it governs the district of Borgerhout in Flanders, with Greens and Flemish social democrats. The local authority allows a wholly different vision to flourish

in the middle of a region dominated by right wing nationalism. In Mons the Left turned down the proposal, avoiding a rather transparent trap. With one councillor, the party would have had no influence on the city's administration at all. Di Rupo, no doubt, hoped PTB-PVDA might follow the road travelled earlier by the Greens.

At a national level, the party's reaction was principled. If one is to win people for a real Left project, an alternative is to be offered, if not, half-hearted policies will only benefit the fake antisystemic profile of the far right in the end. Focusing on the European austerity, implemented by both right and left wing parties, PTB-PVDA asked social democracy to break with European austerity. For a social democratic party like the PS, priding itself, at times, in being the "far left of European social democracy", such might not appear unreasonable. However, on February 16 2017, PS MEPs voted a report on the future of the European Union calling for the TSCG to be incorporated in the European Treaties, and reinforcing the European Semester. Such a position is incompatible with whatever attempt at improving the social and economic situation of the majority of the people.

### **Upside down, inside out**

The European dimension is no small detail for a progressive project of real change. The current European Union pushes people almost simultaneously in two opposite directions. One is the one of a more centralised authoritarianism sacrificing certainly national, but equally popular, sovereignty. Part of the European establishment is pushing for a more centralized European state instrument, be it on federal or confederal bases. From the so-called Five-presidents report on Completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union to the different reports approved on 16 February 2017 by a grand left-right coalition in the European Parliament. As much as Germany's Wolfgang Schäuble might disagree with Jean-Claude Juncker, neither of them opposes stronger weapons to impose unpopular policies.

Far-right nationalism is an equally direct consequence of the current European framework of competition and austerity. Generalized competition, wage and fiscal dumping combine with policies complicating measures touching the privileged few. People are played one against the other. When taking aim at those at the top becomes impossible, people's frustrations are directed, more often than not, towards the less well endowed.

Neither one nor the other option can give a sufficient and satisfying answer to the needs and aspirations of the people. In the face of the current crisis, tables need to be turned. The whole functioning of European integration has to be turned upside down, inside out. Solidarity mechanisms should address imbalances, cooperation replace competition, fiscal and social justice trump austerity.

Such an agenda is indispensable for workers, youth, and women throughout the continent. As such, it should be at the heart of any progressive agenda in Belgium. It inevitably entails breaking with the current treaties, and their idolizing of the market, austerity and economic freedoms over social rights. Breaking with antisocial, antidemocratic and war policies of the European Union is an absolute necessity to convince and mobilise the people. This should be the basis of any convincing programme. The "far left" Belgian social democracy has shied away from this so far.

### **A pathway to change**

For a structural progressive agenda not to remain a mere pious wish, a credible theory of change is desirable. Such a theory of change takes into account power relations. Belgian and indeed European social history made clear that extra parliamentary pressure from social movements and trade unions was most effective in bringing about real positive change.

The most recent history of the European Union points in the same direction. A European-wide movement of port workers succeeded in blocking several port liberalisation directives. Without the very broad alliance of citizens, youth, workers, peasants and trade unions, consumer and environmental organisations, trade policy would never have become the controversial topic it now is. Other topics have shown similar potential for Europe-wide movements. Think of mobilisations from Ireland to Greece and from Italy to Belgium on water services. Public health care or insurance became a major topic thanks to strikes and mobilisations in France, the Netherlands and Great Britain.

Some grass-roots trade unionists accuse Belgian social democracy of undermining social struggle in favour of electoral logic: “don’t strike too often, vote for us next year.” Taking into account the essential nature of popular struggle to change policies, this is nothing short of undermining structural change. Something Belgian social democracy is not new to, as the 1986 struggles showed. Even Marnette discouraged mobilisation after his stance on CETA. Such limiting of the debate is antithetical to the Left's project.

A fundamental challenge to current policies will need to go beyond a mere parliamentary logic in order to advance a progressive agenda. Any cooperation of the Left with other forces should aim at strengthening the forces of social change and popular mobilisation. Refusing to make Parliament the final stage of political struggle, the PTB-PVDA approach is “street-council-street.” Local sections, in towns and inside enterprises, defend their problems and proposals, which the Left brings to political institutions. If the proposals are rejected, the work starts over from the people, factories and neighbourhoods.

Of course, there are many dimensions to relations between social democracy and the Left. The fundamental one from a Left perspective, however, is clearly its own political vision, its own strategic priorities and pathways thereto.