Belgium threatened with break-up

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Nearly four months after the general election, Belgium is still without a new government. King Albert has called for a second time on Flemish Christian Democrat leader Yves Leterme to try and form a government, two months after his first attempt stalled. There are indications that the deep-seated political divisions are developing towards a crisis that threatens the country's very existence. Polls suggest that two thirds of people in the Dutch-speaking north of the country expect Belgium to break up.

On June 10, voters kicked out the ruling Flemish Liberal party (Open VLD) of Guy Verhofstadt. Emerging victorious was an alliance of the right-wing Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) of Leterme and the moderate Flemish-nationalist New Flemish Alliance (NVA). Across the whole country, Christian Democrats and Liberals combined took 81 of the 150 seats in parliament. This was enough to form a government, but short of the two-thirds majority required to change the constitution. Leterme was asked to form a new government. Nearly four months later, that has still not happened.

Verhofstadt's government and officials are acting as caretakers, enacting legislation already passed. Last month, they approved the deployment of 80-100 troops to Chad with the United Nations, and a six-month extension for the 400 troops stationed in Lebanon under UN mandate. A new government is required to set new budgets.

Belgium is a country of around 10.5 million people divided into two main language areas. Dutch is spoken in Flanders, the more affluent northern part of the country, with a population of around 6 million. French is spoken in Wallonie in the south, which has a population of around 4 million. There is also a small German-speaking population on the eastern border of Wallonie. Over the last 45 years, there has been a growing regional separation of the country. Renegotiation of federal powers over that period has extended regional autonomies. The national federal government is made up of regional language parties organised into coalitions. Voting is organised by language parties.

During the recent period, the relative strengths of the two regions have been reversed. Wallonie, which had previously been the powerhouse of the Belgian economy, suffered a catastrophic decline with the collapse of heavy industry in the 1960s. Flanders, which had historically been an agricultural region, developed rapidly as a centre of new technologies. It now accounts for something like 60 percent of the country's GDP, as against Wallonie's 24 percent. Unemployment in Wallonie now stands at 17.6 percent, nearly double the 9.3 percent in Flanders.

This disparity has been seized on by Flemish separatists like the extreme-right Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest—formerly Vlaams Blok), who want an end to taxation support for the poorer southern region. (Some 15 percent of Walloon regional income comes from taxation subsidies.) Flemish nationalists refer to Wallonie as a "bag of stones" they are carrying.

Such attitudes are not confined to VB. Bart de Wever of the NVA spoke last year of the independence of the regions moving a step closer every day. Leterme also campaigned on further extensions of regional autonomies. He has claimed that francophones do not distinguish between separatist demands and simple calls for greater regional powers. The CD&V's response to VB was to also push for greater autonomy and to adopt some of VB's anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Leterme was unable to get agreement for his proposals from Walloon Liberals and Christian Democrats, who feared that they marked a step towards secession, which would be economically catastrophic for Wallonie. Joëlle Milquet of the Democrat Humanist CDH (formerly Christian Democrat)—nominally a Walloon sister party of the CD&V—said that there was "clearly a difference in degree of support for the Belgian federation" between the regions. Milquet was vilified as "Madame No" in the Flemish nationalist press for her opposition to Leterme.

Leterme certainly made no attempt to placate Walloon politicians. Late last year, he said that the francophone population lacked the "intellectual capacity" to learn Dutch. He has also described Belgium as an "accident of history," without "intrinsic value." Devolutionary politics, he said, had left the country as nothing more than "the king, the national football team and certain brands of beer."

By late August, negotiations had stalled over Leterme's proposals for greater regional control of justice, taxation, transport, healthcare, employment and immigration. Leterme withdrew from attempting to form a government on August 25. The king, whose constitutional role is to facilitate the formation of coalitions, invited Hermann van Rompuy of the CD&V to continue discussions. Van Rompuy continued negotiations with all parties until he believed he had discovered sufficient points of convergence for a coalition.

The king has again charged Leterme with forming a government. One commentator told Belgian television that if all goes well—"and it's a big 'if' "—there could be agreement within three weeks.

This is optimistic. Leterme's proposals have not gone away. Although none of the mainstream Flemish parties supported VB's proposals for a referendum on independence, they have all tail-ended VB's regionalism. Recent opinion polls suggest that nearly half of all Flemish would support an independent Flanders, while only around 20 percent of Walloons want an independent

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Wallonie. According to the same poll in Flanders, two thirds of Flemish people believe Belgium will break up “sooner or later.”

The other major dispute is over proposed changes to the Brussels electoral districts. Brussels, the capital, is a French-speaking city just inside the Dutch-speaking province of Brabant. Brussels has the status of a separate language area within the country’s delicately balanced regional mechanism. Leterme had proposed splitting the Brussels electoral district into two. This would prevent francophone inhabitants of the Flemish districts outside the city from voting for francophone parties, or from using French in law courts.

In reply, Milquet demanded that several Flemish municipalities south of the city be added to the francophone Brussels area. This would link Brussels to Wallonie rather than Flanders. The Flemish parties refuse to consider ceding any territory. All the proposals for dividing the country insist that Brussels is part of the deal. Even VB, with its Flemish separatism, proposes specific language status for Brussels to maintain it as the administrative hub of any putative new statelet.

Belgium has long been treated as something of a joke by its European neighbours. Even a relatively serious study of its political crisis (in the *Independent*) was headlined, “Is Belgium on the brink of breaking apart, and would it matter if it did?” The question of Brussels underlines the seriousness of the question.

Belgium came into being as a nation-state belatedly. There were unsuccessful attempts to throw off the rule of the Austrian Empire in the 1780s. Despite the declaration of a Belgian constitution in 1790, Austrian rule was restored until the Napoleonic armies invaded in 1794. With the defeat of Napoleon, the Dutch state was transformed into a monarchy. What were then known as the Southern Netherlands (what is now Belgium) had not at this point existed as a separate nation-state. With Austria reluctant to resume control of its imperial territory, the great powers of Europe made the Southern Netherlands part of the unified Dutch kingdom, in part to ensure a strong northern border against the French.

In 1830 an uprising of the francophone Brussels middle class united Dutch and French speakers across the whole territory we now know as Belgium against their Dutch rulers. Belgium was tolerated by the major European powers as a convenient buffer, preventing direct conflict between empires. Belgium was allowed to survive, and continued to be in a strategic point of confluence—as witness the number of European conflicts first fought out on Belgian soil.

Conscious of this, and also of their relative weakness, the Belgian ruling class deliberately made Brussels an administrative centre for Europe. For the European Coal and Steel Community (which developed into the European Union), NATO, and many other Europe-wide institutions, Brussels became a capital.

Disputes over Brussels remain potentially explosive. Bart de Wever described Brussels as “the last obstacle” that had kept Belgium together, as “nobody wants to lose Brussels.”

It is not the only obstacle. Belgium is saddled with a massive public debt—87 percent of GDP last year. Any division of the country would involve dividing this debt. For all that sections of the press advocate a peaceful “divorce,” such a thing could not be achieved without a devastating impact on the living conditions of millions of people across Europe.

That such a proposal could seriously be made—the *Economist* stated that “Sometimes it is right for a country to recognise that its job is done”—indicates the historically redundant character of the nation-state today. Global capitalism no longer requires the nation-state for the organisation of production. Smaller emerging states can function just as adequately for the requirements of transnational corporations.

Such states, though, must be competitive on the global market. Any attempt to establish a separate Flanders would be on the basis of savage attacks on wages and conditions to make it attractive to outside investment. It would also establish itself at the expense of conditions in the poorer region of Wallonie. One journalist in *Le Figaro* appealed to France to come to Wallonie’s aid. This seems unlikely. The most optimistic view of what would happen is that Wallonie would be split between France, Luxembourg and Germany, which would itself have a destabilising effect. De Wever denied that Wallonie would be abandoned, saying, “You can co-operate better as good neighbours than as an unhappily married couple. I’m not a Flemish Milosevic.”

His invocation of the Balkans is telling.

This balkanisation of Belgium has wider implications. Across Europe, countries are fracturing along regional fault lines, and the cracks are visible from Spain to Britain. Such tensions cannot be resolved under the existing political system. There is an urgent necessity for a socialist programme to unite the working class internationally and combat the poisonous growth of nationalism and regionalism. French, Dutch and German-speaking workers must unite with their class brothers and sisters across the continent in building the United Socialist States of Europe.

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